

PRODUCING CONSUMPTION:  
DOING WORK ON A SUPERMARKET SHOP FLOOR

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This dissertation addresses the dearth of research on the retail sector by adding significant data to theories of consumption that privilege the consumer and render the retailers and their millions of workers invisible. Based on an innovative methodology of reflexive participant observation as a full-time retail clerk at a large urban supermarket, my findings overturn the stereotype of low-wage work as low-skill. The conceptualization of work as a process of “doing” allows for the inclusion of the compromises and contentions involved in working on a supermarket shop floor.

The study begins with a discussion of the methodology of reflexive participant observation and is grounded by an historical account of the rise of the supermarket superpowers. The main chapters illustrate the concept of “producing consumption”: stocking the supermarket shelves, staffing the store, and “doing work” on the shop floor. Stocking and staffing the store illustrate two contradictions of food retailing. Although supermarket shelves seem flush with items, the process of stocking belies the variety. Second, although low-wage workers are assumed to be interchangeable, the rationalized hiring process requires them to be skilled at being unskilled.

The socialization of the supermarket worker and the processes involved in learning to manage the self and others are discussed in the following chapters. The mental and physical demands on the self illustrate the specificity of retail jobs and “doing work” on the supermarket shop floor includes unpacking cases of food as well as developing strategies (some unintentionally detrimental) for dealing with the drone of repetitive tasks, an enacted social inequality, and the encouraged subordination of self. Inherent in interactive service work is the presence of customers, and employees developed informal scripts to manage customer service interactions. Social networks provided much needed support for employees but gossip also worked as a form of surveillance and social control.

Premised on the need to include retailing in theories of consumption, supermarkets in studies of the food system, and workers in our analyses of both, this research illustrates the embodied reality of “doing work” and “producing consumption” in the food system.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Rachel Alison Schwartz was born May 6, 1973, in St. Louis, Missouri. She attended Bellaire High School in Houston, Texas, and received the Bachelor of Arts in Sociology from the University of Texas, Austin, in 1995. In 2003 she received the Master of Art in Sociology from The New School for Social Research in New York City, New York. In the fall of 2003 she entered the Department of Development Sociology at Cornell University.

This dissertation is dedicated to my father, the first Dr. Schwartz.  
And to Timothy McConville for the opportunity to become the second.

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## **CHAPTER ONE:**

### **INTRODUCTION**

It has become cliché to say that consumers can vote with their dollars to encourage, influence, and enact social, environmental, and cultural change, but the role that corporate food retailers play in constructing the “election” has been overlooked. The role that supermarkets play in our lives becomes more important as the food retailing sector consolidates and fewer and fewer corporations make decisions that shape how, when, and where we shop (Schwartz and Lyson 2007). In this dissertation, I examine the process of “producing consumption” in the food system by analyzing the intricacies of food retailing: stocking the supermarket shelves, staffing the store, and “doing work” on the shop floor.

Power and control within the food system has shifted from a “manufacturer push” to a “retailer pull” and the food retailing corporations hold a unique position as gatekeeper, exerting considerable influence vertically, over manufacturers and customers (Clarke 2000; Harvey et al. 2001; Hollingsworth 2004; Burch and Lawrence 2005). The items on supermarket shelves are the final product of complex social relations including trade agreements, international transportation and innovations in processing techniques. With over 50,000 (Nestle 2002) items to choose from, the average supermarket appears to be a cornucopia of choice free from the complications (political, ecological, social) involved in sourcing, production and distribution (Johnston 2008). The supermarket is falsely understood to the voting booth in a consumer-driven election of a just food system and we must move away from

the neoliberal reliance on consumer choice (see Johnston, Biro, and MacKendrick 2010) and, instead, examine the retailer as an active participant in structuring the complex process of “producing consumption” in the food system.

Food retailers have reached far outside of supermarket walls and significantly changed supply-chain relations and producer livelihoods around the world, particularly as the global South becomes a farm to supply the retailing revolution (McMichael and Friedmann 2007). Although *production* workers such as tomato pickers, migrant farmers, and processing/packing workers have been included in analyses of the food system, the millions of low-wage service-workers in the supermarkets have been rendered invisible by the omission of retailing from larger studies of the food system.

The authority given to food retailers “to establish rules and practices for *food* safety and quality” (McMichael and Friedmann 2007:295, emphasis added) allows a similar influence over the rules and practices for the establishment of *worker* safety and quality, including the perceived legitimacy of outsourcing the socialization process to become a supermarket worker to the worker herself (following a general tendency of the flexible neoliberal economy to outsource). Employees are required to learn how to manage themselves and others and this dissertation will explore the plethora of skills required to effectively “do work” on a supermarket shop floor. Although the retailer is firmly in control of setting the standards and expectations for the work of employees, the job of learning how to both perform and master the tasks of “doing work” is left to the workers themselves. What appear to be simple and straightforward tasks on

paper, i.e. put this item in the correct space on the shelf, become negotiations for control, consent and contention and “doing work” becomes “doing inequality.” The conceptualization of work as a process of “doing” allows for the inclusion of the emotional, physical and social compromises made in order to successfully accomplish the necessary tasks of working on a supermarket shop floor.

This dissertation examines the construction of a workforce that is dominated by corporate interests and the reality of working in a large corporate supermarket by illustrating the daily grind of working, living and becoming an integral part of a bureaucracy. The contemporary hiring process for low-wage service work is dominated by the retailer and the components and nuances of hiring construct and determine the role of the interactive service worker in the larger consumer society. By examining the complex, multi-staged process of hiring we can begin to better understand the production of the concept of the ideal retail worker and the breadth of the role of retailers in modern consumer society. In order to understand the dynamics of “doing work” within the store, we must begin by looking at the hiring process of these particular workers. Supermarket work is low-wage and interactive,<sup>1</sup> although sometimes only in the most base sense of being in the presence of others. Although assumed to be low-skill, I will illustrate immense amount of determination, self-confidence and ability required to handle the mental and physical demands of dealing with the consumer public in a retail setting (see also Newman 1999 and Williams 2006).

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<sup>1</sup> Leidner (1993) defines interactive service work as service work that requires employees to have direct face-to-face contact with customers.

This research contributes to and expands three fields of sociological inquiry: cultural sociology, economic sociology and the sociology of work. The study of consumerist society and consumption has floundered between these three sociological framings and this study is grounded by its tangible location within a retail store. The culture-ideology of consumerism (Sklair 2001) has created not only an industry of consumer goods, but also the consumers and their differentiated expectations, aspirations and attitudes (Patel 2009). The current moment of consumerism is unique in that the role of the corporate retailer, particularly the transnational supermarket, has reached a level of penetration into the space, place and ideology of contemporary U.S. society previously unseen.

The presupposition that consumer culture is a devalued form of a more prestigious and legitimate “culture” has largely resulted in the significance of the processes involved in “producing consumption” to be overlooked. The rejection of consumerism, Schor (2000) argues, has largely occurred at the individual level and there has been less of a public discourse of the particularities of living in a neoliberal consumerist society. The focus of wages as the means towards consumption complicates decisions regarding leisure time (as the consumer) as it becomes more difficult to choose an option that negates the possibility for wages (as the worker). It is for this reason that the belief that hard work ensures economic and social success has flourished – the evidence and experience presented here should dispel this myth. More than adding warm bodies to cold theories of economic sociology, this research is the study of the implications of the reconstitution of work as low-wage, temporal, sporadic and flexible.

Classic theories of consumption have been criticized for a lack of empirical evidence to substantiate their theoretical claims (Miller 1998) and they have, in their rush to make customers explicit, overlooked retailers and workers. Incorporating the role of the retailer to theories of consumption will produce a more complete as well as nuanced discourse and contribute to a better understanding of the intricacies involved in “producing consumption.” Premised on the argument that we need to include retailing in theories of consumption, supermarkets in studies of the food system, and workers in our analyses of both, I am arguing that an empirical study of low-wage, interactive service-work on a supermarket<sup>2</sup> shop floor will contribute significant understanding of the complexities and inequalities of “producing consumption” in a flexible neoliberal economy. The significant contribution of this research is the presentation of the lived reality of “producing consumption,” as the experiences of the workers, in a large corporate food retailer.

### ***Adding retail***

During the late 1970s and into the early 1990s, Miller et al. (1998) note, consumption declared its independence as a field of study. Theorists such as Bourdieu (1984) and deCerteau (1984) focused solely on consumption and excluded any aspect of the production process. The transformation to a consumer society became the pinnacle of a “modern” society and identities became reconceived as acquired (read consumed) rather than inherited. Consuming has become an “inescapable” part of our lives (Warde 2005) yet

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<sup>2</sup> Supermarket, food retailer and food retailing are used interchangeably within the dissertation and I am deliberately not using the term “site of consumption” following Williams (2006) argument that this type of classification eliminates the processes and practices of work. The more benign label of supermarket allows the workers, customers and retail to semantically co-exist.

theories of consumption have generally ignored the role of retail (Harvey et al. 2001). Miller (1998), in his study of supermarket shopping in the U.K., ventures inside of a supermarket but sees only love and devotion in the highly gendered task of food provisioning (DeVault 1994; Zukin 2004) and the large transnational food retailers become invisible. Zukin (2004) furthers this romanticized notion of shopping by arguing that because we no longer “make” things or have contact with nature we look to shopping to provide a comparable sense of meaning and satisfaction. They both fail, unfortunately, to expand the gaze to include the low-wage workers employed by the retailer that significantly construct and influence the shop floor experience.

Most sociological research on supermarkets has been in the context of consumer societies outside of the United States: United Kingdom (Miller et al. 1998; Clarke 2000; Wrigley and Lowe 2002), Australia (Humphrey 1998; Dixon 2002) and France (Bourdieu 1984). These studies have allowed a better understanding of retailing and consumption, but do not make the need for substantive research in an American context obsolete. Food retailers are no longer only fronts for selling manufacturer’s wares, they have become major players in “producing consumption” (Burch and Lawrence 2005).

Supermarkets have used their economic prowess to leverage authoritative reputations and although Mills ([1956] 2000) warned about the entry of the corporate into the private and public, a coherent field of the corporate sphere has yet to materialize, we know little about them, in general, and even less specifically about the interactions between consumers, workers and retailers in the U.S.



### ***Adding supermarkets: The new retail authority***

The two disparate bodies of knowledge about food and work have yet to intersect at the supermarket. On one hand, when food retailers are incorporated into sociological analysis it is almost overwhelmingly fast-food restaurants that receive critical attention (Leidner 1993; Fantasia 1995; Reiter 1996; Watson 1997; Talwar 2003). On the other hand, elaborate histories of food retailing have provided substantive background information about changing food selling/distribution strategies (Mayo 1993; Humphery 1998) yet are outdated and provide little analysis of the experiences or implications of these changes. Barndt's *Tangled Routes* (2002) is an obvious exception and uses the movement of the tomato from the Mexican fields to the Canadian supermarket customers' carts to analyze the social relations and social inequality implicit in the global food system.

Viewing the supermarket as the nexus of multiple relationships and practices that intersect within the store itself as customers, products, workers and the retailer interact, will enable a more complex understanding of the role of the retailer in "producing consumption" in the food system. The retailer acts as a gatekeeper between the customer and the rest of the food system by exerting a significant amount of control over the stocking of the store. By constructing a particular array of items for sale *as well as* the perception of them (healthy, fresh, natural), large food retailing corporations exert a relatively new type of market-based authority (Dixon 2003 and 2007) in the current corporate food regime (McMichael 2005). Through relationships forged by their administrative staffs with rational-legal authority figures such as doctors and nutritionists, supermarkets are able to exert themselves as the guides and guardians for

confused consumers navigating the supermarket (Dixon 2003 and 2007). This manifestation as trustworthy and legitimate sources of knowledge allows supermarkets to present themselves as the best determiner of the role they *should* play within the food system and market economy (Dixon 2003).

The image maintenance work done by the administrative staffs of the large supermarket corporations presents a unified, codified and branded image of a place where customers can find appropriate foods for themselves and their households. By “creating an aura of strength,” developing “emotional attachments” and having a “body of people willing to serve the enterprise,” the new retail authorities achieve and maintain their position as legitimate authority figures (Dixon 2007). It is unclear whether the “new retail authority” provides both “good” food and “good” jobs and Dixon (2003 and 2007) does not address the maintenance work that occurs outside of the corporate offices on the shop floor on the supermarket. The main difference between paid administrative (i.e. marketing) work and the emotional, social and cultural work of the shop floor employees is twofold. First, the shop floor workers do not have the clearly defined “group membership” of administrative staffs, they lack consolidated goals, and they do not have a staff assisting them in their efforts. Like the differentiated customers whose efforts cannot trump those of an efficient bureaucracy, workers are a splintered faction. The lack of coherent actions leads to a multiplicity that reiterates the retailers dominating ideology by default. Second, the intention of the relationship between shop floor workers and the corporation is more opaque. A stated goal of a marketing executive is to preserve and foster the image of the corporation (the brand) but

the work of the entry-level cashiers, I am arguing, inadvertently solidifies the role of the corporation in the social, as well as economic, spheres.

As I will show in this dissertation, the role that the food retailers play as employers similarly reinforces their role as authority figures in “producing consumption” and they are able to make significant claims about “doing work.” By writing the script of the hiring, employment and firing processes these large retailing corporations construct, in essence, the concept of the “ideal-type” employee and reality of low-wage, interactive service work. Inherent in the job description, although never explicitly stated, is the requirement for workers to subjugate their own needs to those of the retailer. This, however, should not be seen as a relationship based on coercion and resistance, but rather, the employee’s consent to participate in the unequal exchange of labor for wages and subordination of their selves (see Sherman 2007). The management of the self and others is executed within an ideology of work crafted, oftentimes, by the same administrative staffs offering us “natural” and “fresh” foods.

Customers also play a pivotal role in the relationship between retailers and workers. Embraced as wanting-consumers by the munificent retailer, the customer is then, conflictually, imbued with the authority to discipline workers. The maxim that “the customer is always right” is felt acutely on the shop floor by the workers and the customers. It is also encouraged by the retailer, to their own benefit, as the outsourcing of management from paid executives to unpaid customers seems to be cost-efficient. The confidence fostered in the customers, *by the retailer*, allowed them to exert themselves as the dominating opinion in social interactions. Seemingly benign customer service interactions

reiterated the larger authority of the food retailer. It is within these tensions that the processes and practices of “producing consumption” in the food system emerge as the tensions between retailers, customers and workers.

### ***Adding work and workers***

There is a nostalgia about work in American supermarkets – the teenage boy whose first job it is to sack groceries and clumsily push them to the happy housewife’s car; the experienced female cashier who knows her customers by name and works the same Saturday morning shift every week; the older butcher who knows which customers prefer the lean cuts of meat and has it waiting for them every Wednesday night. And then there is the reality – a rotating group of employees who are given timed bathroom breaks, refuse to direct you towards the lettuce and are underpaid and erratically scheduled. The customers refuse to make eye contact during social interaction, hide packages of half eaten cookies behind the pasta sauce, and ask employees if they are stupid or just don’t speak English.

The presence of an unmanaged group of people, the customers, marks the most significant distinction between retail work and low-wage manufacturing work. Although the process of shopping does have very specific set of norms, customers are wild cards in the social interaction of customer service, whether an employee is helping someone find a product or a cashier ringing up a customer’s order. The practice of working for a retailer that sells its goods to the general consuming public creates a set of demands that the employee must master in order to effectively and efficiently perform the work.

Although doing retail work is contingent upon the context of buying and selling, the concept of work shapes more than actions within the marketplace. The millions of low-wage workers who are struggling to support themselves and their families do not become self-sufficient when they leave their place of employment. And doing work, from the perspective of the customer, is not necessarily dependent on being inside or outside of a retail store. Behaviors conditioned by “doing work” exhibit themselves in other circumstances such as queuing for a water fountain (rather than the checkout), interacting with colleagues or asking for directions (rather than for service at the store), or forming an ideology about food choice or health care (rather than about workers or consumption). Doing work, in this modern consumer society, also involves the internalization of capitalist work predicated on inequality, hierarchy and bureaucratic ideals.

Low-wage retail work is often assumed to be low-skill, Newman (1999) argues, because the competency required to work these low-wage retail jobs is obscured by their characterization as such. Supermarket work has become highly rationalized and the process of performing tasks has been reduced to the assumptions of key components. Observing a variety of employees performing the tasks in a wider variety of styles indicates that although a process may have distinct steps *on paper*, it is often executed in a uniquely individual manner. Tasks may have become highly rationalized but employees are not and the skills required to follow directions while *caring* about following directions should not be assumed to be universal nor simplistic.

Service workers are often assumed to unwittingly follow corporate scripts rather than act on their own accord during service transactions. It is for this reason that Ritzer calls them “simulated people” (2005:103). What he notes as the employee’s lack of agency in modern consumer society serves to further dehumanize retail workers, Williams argues. In order to see the “physical effort, emotional stamina, and self control” (Williams 2006:93), and diversity, we must look at the service interaction from the perspective of the worker. In the years since the studies conducted by Williams (2006), Leidner (1993), and Sherman (2007) many of the tensions surrounding the loss of individualization within bureaucratic organizations has been internalized as the normative ideology of work. Even Patel (2009), in a critical analysis of the global food system, similarly homogenizes the millions of supermarket workers as “mind-numbed and unhappy” (p. 231), obscuring the complexity and skill required to do interactive service work in the new millennium. Frustration at the treatment of workers by the institution and the customers was directed anywhere other than the retailer.

I am arguing that we need to include these workers and the reproductive labor they perform in theories of consumption. Adding a theoretical understanding of service work (as argued as being needed by Korczynski and Macdonald 2009) by interpreting the empirical data gathered through the experience of practice to contribute to the debate on the “essential elements” of service work and the implications for worker (and I argue, for us all). This dissertation continues a methodological tradition of going on to the shop floor in order to create more complex and nuanced research on the tensions between organizations, work and the self.

### ***“Doing (supermarket) work”***

West and Zimmerman (1987) argue that to truly understand gender it needs to be theoretically re-imagined as something “done” rather than merely something displayed or achieved. Doing gender is not about the performance of the display of the ideal of feminine or masculine, but rather an interactional and institutional component of social relationships that is present at every moment and in every relation. By doing gender, differences are created between women and men. From this perspective we can examine food retailing labor as “doing work” in order to develop a new understanding of work, like gender, “as a routine accomplishment embedded in everyday interaction” (West and Zimmerman 1987:125). This notion of the interactional and institutional character of a social role lends itself to the theoretical reconceptualization of the seemingly opposed but entirely mutually dependent categories of employee and customer.

The concept of work, when understood through the lens of “doing” emerges not from an individual but from social situations. This point is important to keep in mind when discussing actual employees involved in doing work. Each individual and her particularities is interacting with other employees, customers and the conceptual retailer and it is through these interactions that the concept of doing retail work emerges.

One of the starkest differences between “doing work” and “doing difference” is that a social inequality based on circumstance (being at work) is just that, circumstantial. Gender-, race- and class-based social inequality is ubiquitous and emerges from every and all social situations (West and Fenstermaker

1995). What emerges from “doing work” is certainly a type of social inequality but a mercurial one that wanes and ebbs as those engaging in social interaction vary. This distinction also highlights one of the most common critiques of the “doing” discourse: although a useful ethnomethodological concept, “doing work” must include the context in which the work is being done. The relevance of this research is precisely the contextual boundaries of looking at “doing work” *on the supermarket shop floor*. Collins (1995) argues, in a critique of *Doing Difference* (West and Fenstermaker 1995), that the “power relations that construct difference” have been erroneously omitted from their argument. By incorporating the retailer it allows us to see the nexus of relationships occurring between workers, customers, products and the retailer and the impact of asymmetrical power dynamics.

The recognition of people as employees and/or customers seems inherently simple and straightforward. To some extent it is – when you enter a store as a customer, the people working there are the employees of the retailer. But the social categorization of these two groups of people into employee/customer is much more complex than the labels indicate. Every retail employee is also a customer of some sort. Whether they purchase goods or services from their employers is a moot point – they can all be assumed to purchase something in the mainstream marketplace whether it be groceries, a cup of coffee or a meal out. Although many people have had experience as an employee, and all have had experience as a customer, the categories are assumed to be mutually exclusive. Furthermore, the two categories are sub-categories as well as flexible labels. The positioning as either a customer or an employee is



subordinate to larger categories based on gender, economic, or racial status group affiliations.

West and Fenstermaker (1995) posit that people “see” only two sexes and that categorical determinism can also be seen in the imposed distinctions between employees and customers, even as the labels fluctuate with context. The employee helping someone purchase groceries will go out on her break to purchase a cup of coffee and will easily transition between the two groups and be able to seamlessly “do” each of them, simultaneously or separately.

The purpose of this dissertation is to re-conceptualize work as the “routine, methodical and recurring accomplishment” (West and Zimmerman 1987:126) of both the employee and the customer. Work then becomes a process and a relation rather than a status or a wage. Rather than see work “as a property of individuals, [I] conceive [it] as an emergent feature of social situations: both as an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangement and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of [modern consumer] society” (West and Zimmerman 1987:126). If we are observing a 35 year old woman doing the grocery shopping for her family (husband and two children) we can assume that she has at least 20 years of experience negotiating the shopping experience – from buying a soda or going to the movies in high school to provisioning for herself after moving from her parents’ home, to making larger purchases such as furniture, electronics and automobiles. Every day of those 20 years as an independent actor in the marketplace she has lived, experienced and reproduced the status of herself as a customer, and hence, others as employees. By the time we are observing her, “doing work”

as a shopper has been internalized and is assumed to be completely natural characteristic of *an individual*. The poignancy of West and Zimmerman's (1987) and then West and Fenstermaker's (1995) arguments is the powerful conceit of misinterpreting social conditions for individual traits.

As West and Fenstermaker (1995:13) argue, "no person can experience gender without simultaneously experiencing race and class." Similarly, when customers and employees interact, the false categories imposed in this analysis deny the experience by each of all, in a general sense. Customer employee interactions reiterate customers, employees and retailers. The individuals described in these pages have unique experiences that vary based on personality, mood and extenuating circumstances, yet all serve to reify the retailer and maintain the social inequality between workers and shoppers. It is important not to isolate the groups even when useful for a more in-depth analysis. The experience of doing retail work, by the employee, can be told from the perspective of the employee yet the customers and retailers must firmly remain present in the narrative; in other words, experience conveyed by an individual still represents a social inequality constructed through (larger, social) interaction.

"Doing work" is a useful analytic tool because it challenges the static notion of work as wages and benefits by encouraging a constant engagement with the concept of reproduction (of self, others, the retailer, work, consumerism, etc.). I will use the terms "doing work" and "work" interchangeably as the shorthand for the low-wage, high-skill, interactive service laboring done *on the shop floor* that I observed and participated in while working at a supermarket.

Though classified, in general, as service work because of the lack of production involved, doing retail work is a specific type of laboring. Shop floor retail work is inherently interactive and the physical presence of customers distinguishes supermarket work from other types of service work, such as call center work, where the customer is physically absent. The work is low-wage and Herzenberg et al. (cited in Hughes 1999) note that the income gap is wider in services than in manufacturing. Although many supermarkets pay a higher wage than the Federal minimum, this relative overage should not be confused with a living wage. The retail work described throughout this dissertation is often assumed to be low-skill work but, as I will illustrate, it requires the ability to learn and manage complex processes and practices. Even highly rationalized tasks require further emotional work (see Tolich 1993).

### ***The research***

Like others before me,<sup>3</sup> doing participant observation within a large organization allowed a front-line perspective on the complexities of being a low-wage worker in a neoliberal consumerist society. I acquired the position as an entry-level retail clerk in a similar fashion to my co-workers. At no point did anyone at The Supermarket know that I was “doing research” while I was “doing work” despite my policy to answer any and all questions honestly. My status as a doctoral student was clearly listed on my resume and I was asked

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<sup>3</sup> I found the sociological studies of MacLean (1899), Leidner (1993), Barndt (2002), Williams (2006), Sherman (2007), Pettinger (2005a and 2005b), and Sallaz (2005) to be the most influential in my development of this research. Additionally, Ehrenreich (2001) provides a thorough journalistic account of working low-wage jobs; Sam (2009) provides a fascinating anecdotal account of working as a front-end cashier in a major French supermarket; and Frankel (2007) documents his “adventures” working on the front-line for major U.S. service corporations.

about my status during the interview only as it pertained to my scheduling needs. Most co-workers knew I was “still” in school yet most questions were more intimate in nature: “are you happily married?,” “do you want to have children?,” “do you have a lot of friends?”

This project was reviewed and approved by the University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) that oversees research ethics and although I was not required to obtain written/informed consent from the participants (co-workers and customers), I diligently maintained their anonymity by using pseudonyms in my field notes and in the dissertation. Slight changes to personal details and circumstances have been made in order to further protect the identity of the persons and places included in this study.

No small amount of time and energy was spent training me how to do supermarket work. I was socialized to dress appropriately, behave accordingly and interact with customers and co-workers properly. The totality of this training was that I learned what it meant to be good retailer worker.<sup>4</sup> I was expected to take advantage of the benefits offered – health care, sick days, training opportunities, but I was not to date my co-workers or engage in “inappropriate” interactions with customers. I followed my co-workers’ lead and learned from them, rather than from the books, how to appropriately manage myself and others on The Supermarket shop floor.

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<sup>4</sup> I use worker and employee interchangeably throughout the dissertation. The label of worker allows a greater level of semantic autonomy but the retailer should remain assumed in each. As I am arguing throughout, the social categorization of individuals as workers occurs at the workplace and they are, as such, defined in relation to both employers and customers.

I was paid just over the U.S. national average wage for a supermarket clerk (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010) and despite previous retail experience I was offered the standard entry-level salary for the store. The position I was initially offered was part-time but after a few months I was able to increase my hours to work what was considered a full-time schedule (four to five eight hour shifts per week). I did not earn enough to pay my half of household bills<sup>5</sup> although I did have the financial security of an employed spouse.

The research project is larger than the research site itself and is the main impetus for maintaining the anonymity of the store, the employees and the customers. Shopping observations over the past several years have provided adequate comparative data to conclude that the experiences detailed in this dissertation are comparable to at least the other sites within the same city, if not the chain as a whole. Training materials provided (employee handbook, explanation of benefits, etc.) are produced at either the regional or national level allowing for consistency throughout the corporation and the generalizability of my analysis. A full discussion of the methodological considerations can be found in Chapter Two.

### ***The Supermarket***

This dissertation examines the lived experience of “doing work” in a highly bureaucratized corporate supermarket – hereto referred to as The

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<sup>5</sup> Like Williams (2006) and Ehrenreich (2001) the purpose of this study was not to live off of my wages and having a supplemental income was something I did not take for granted. Most, if not all, of my co-workers were working to support themselves, and oftentimes, contribute to their immediate family's expenses. Many were contributing to household expenses and a handful were supporting children, both alone and with partners. A few were supported financially by their families and were working for supplemental income to cover personal expenses and saving for college or their own apartment.

Supermarket.<sup>6</sup> Although no food retailer sells in every major U.S. market, The Supermarket is one of the largest food retailers and does sell across the nation. Most importantly, The Supermarket has a reputation for providing excellent service and is regarded, in the industry, as a good place to work.

The Supermarket Corporation is a transnational supermarket chain that operates full-service supermarket stores selling fresh, prepared, and processed foods as well as household items, personal care goods, and pet supplies. The Supermarket Corporation ranks consistently in the Supermarket News' list of the top 75 supermarkets in the U.S. and is known for their focus on quality foods and strong customer service. The store I worked in was a non-union store and this is consistent with national level patterns – only 20% of U.S. grocery store workers are in a union, making my position in a non-union store a more common experience for food retail workers. The Supermarket store was located in a high cost of living area and entry-level wages at the store were \$10 an hour. Employees were eligible for a raise (though not guaranteed) after working, full-time, for six months. Shifts were scheduled for 8.5 hours but wages were only provided for 8 hours of work, including one 15-minute break. Standard over-time and holiday wages were provided.

The Supermarket is located on a bustling street in a diverse section of a large U.S. city. In close proximity to the store were a variety of other national, corporate chain retailers (clothing, drugstore/pharmacy, restaurant, supermarket) but they were the minority amidst a resolute set of smaller

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<sup>6</sup> The Supermarket is the pseudonym chosen to represent this food retailing corporation as well as evoke a sense of an Orwellian, all-encompassing being.

businesses selling similar types of goods. Residents of the neighborhood varied in terms of age, income, gender and race/ethnicity although the ideal customer base (as described by a manager) were the DINKs – double-income no child couples – that had been moving into the area in the last few decades. Located near multiple forms of public transportation and close to the intersection of two major thoroughfares, the store stayed busy during most of its operating hours, with long lines forming during lunch and after-work rushes.

One of the largest changes within the food retailing industry has been the focus on the retail outlet as “more” than a place to buy toilet paper and The Supermarket has very successfully engaged with this trend. The store was bright and airy and, although a bit smaller than other stores in the chain, had the same aesthetic feel – high ceilings, muted colors, and displays of artistically arranged fresh and packaged goods piled high. Recipe cards can be found in the produce section, free sample afternoons are a popular draw, and the prepared foods counter seems to be continuously expanding. The shelves are stocked with items promoting everything from the contents inside (delicious cookies) to the state of being reached when consumed (to help maintain a healthy digestive system) and, as a full-service supermarket, everything from eggs to butter to imported dog food, was available for purchase.

### ***The shop floor***

I worked in a sub-department within The Supermarket common to all of its outlets, as well as most major supermarkets. In order to maintain the anonymity of my field research site I will not describe it in any particularity. My

responsibilities included, but were not limited to, stocking the shelves, assisting customers, working a cash register, and preparing the store for opening and closing. Management of The Supermarket was fragmented and the department supervisor had direct control over the hiring, firing and scheduling of workers. She was, in turn, supervised by store managers who were supervised by regional managers who were supervised by national managers. The typical service triangulation of worker – manager – customer (Leidner 1993) was slightly altered in The Supermarket. Actual members of management make only slight appearances within the dissertation and the majority of the observations are focused on worker – worker or worker – customer relations. Management should, however, be assumed within all contexts and their influence taken as a given in all interactions, regardless of participation and/or tangibility.

### ***The workers***

The staff of The Supermarket was certainly not a homogenous group. There were over 400 employees at the store although just over twenty in my department, including three department managers (my figures do not include store level or corporate management employees and the rest of the figures are for the department). The ages ranged from approximately 18 to 45 with most people in their late twenties.<sup>7</sup> Approximately 60% of the workers were women, which appeared unique compared to store level observations. Many managers were women but most floor clerks throughout the store were men. Most of the

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<sup>7</sup> I have approximated the age of my co-workers to the best of my ability. In many cases, age had been discussed and I used the self-declared age as data. In a few cases, I had to make an educated guess based on details such as children, life experiences, and comments during conversations. My department could be viewed as a unique microcosm within the store, but to my best observations of employees on the floor and in the break room, the age range is generalizable to the larger store population.



employees in my department had at least some college experience, including a few with a college degree and one co-worker had an advanced degree. All but one co-worker finished high school. A handful of co-workers were educated outside of the US. A few of the employees had been with The Supermarket Corporation over five years but most had only worked there for less than two years. During the fieldwork, no one quit or was fired although one employee was transferred to a different department in a different store.

In previous studies of retail work (Talwar 2003; Pettinger 2005a), the homogeneity of the respective workforces was of note and hiring practices/social networks were examined in order to better understand the production of these similar groups. In The Supermarket, neither condition existed – there was not a homogenous group of employees and the hiring process was highly automated and did not allow network ties to prove stronger than the information provided about themselves conveyed through the personality assessment.

### ***The customers***

There was not an overarching type of customer that came into the supermarket. The gender of the customer base was approximately 60% women, 40% men, consistent with national level data (Goodman 2008). Many appeared to be busy workers coming in to pick up lunch at the prepared foods counter, but many nights the store was populated by people purchasing items requiring cooking (raw meats, fruits and vegetables, dried pasta, etc.) and they were men as often as women. I saw very few men shopping with their children; most children at the store were accompanied by a woman. Men with

children often asked for assistance and said they were picking something up requested by their wife and were not familiar with the product or the store layout.

Customers were old, young, and middle aged. They were dressed in business attire as often as casual wear. They paid with cash, credit cards and debit cards, although credit card purchases were by far the most common. Whether customers were paying off their monthly statements was beyond the scope of information that I could access. Many employee-customers would use their debit cards pay for purchases and claim to be nearing a zero balance in their bank account. The one instance in which I saw a customer being arrested for shoplifting it was a well-dressed woman in her 20s, carrying a designer handbag.

### ***Outline of the dissertation***

The following chapters explicate this study of the processes and practices of “producing consumption” in the food system. Chapter Two addresses the methodological details of the research: the unique form of ethnographic method employed in the study, the techniques used to gather data, the process of analysis, and the benefits and limitations of reflexive participant observation.

Chapter Three is an historical account of the rise of the supermarket superpowers that elucidates the current dominance of the food retailing industry. I have synthesized the past eighty years into three distinct phases in

order to better understand the development and breadth of the food retailers' reach.

Chapter Four examines the role of food retailers as gatekeepers of the food system by detailing the processes of stocking and staffing the store. Although supermarket shelves seem flush with tens of thousands of items available for purchase, the process of stocking the shelves belies the variety. The analysis of the hiring process provides a nuanced understanding of the construction of the contemporary workforce. Low-wage supermarket workers are assumed to be interchangeable yet the multi-staged hiring process is intended to synthesize only the most qualified into the hiring pool.

Chapters Five, Six, Seven and Eight address the socialization of the supermarket worker and the complex processes involved in learning to manage the self and others. Chapters Five and Six deal with the management of the self – the mastery of dealing with the physical and mental demands of a low-wage interactive retail service job. Chapter Five examines the physical demands of working on the shop floor such as appearance, scheduling and wages; Chapter Six presents the intricacies of the mental work such as learning the rules, jargon and how to fit in. Chapters Seven and Eight examine the employees' relations to the "others" they encounter on the supermarket shop floor. Chapter Seven analyzes "doing" the customer service relationship and furthers the understanding of authority in practice. Chapter Eight examines the social networks amongst employees and the role of friendships and gossip on the shop floor.

Chapter Nine provides an overview of the practices and processes involved in “producing consumption,” as well as a note on the issue of “consent” in low-wage interactive service work. Finally, a glossary of supermarket shop floor jargon is included in Appendix A.

### ***A note about presentation style***

During the time on The Supermarket shop floor I kept extensive field notes and additional data was gathered during weekly shopping observations when I would enter other stores in the chain to do my own (often constructed for research purposes) shopping. Field notes were written to document work shifts and shopping observations and they provide insight into the nuances of doing retail work.

Excerpts from the notes are interspersed throughout the dissertation in order to present the “lived experience” of working on The Supermarket shop floor. Often raw and expressive, the passages included should not be misinterpreted as personal anecdotes. Although written from my perspective, they have been included to illustrate the themes that emerged in the larger analysis (see Smith 2005) and create a more intimate portrayal of The Supermarket shop floor. The analysis then contextualizes the experiences to build a broader understanding of the management of the self and others.

Ethnographic research, particularly participant observation, can provide a rich wealth of data for sociological analysis. Working as an entry-level clerk at the supermarket allowed me to gather data from the application process to “doing work” on the shop floor to, eventually, end in theoretical saturation and leaving

the position. This research is not about the particularities of working at The Supermarket, it is, again, about the practices and processes involved in “producing consumption” and “doing work” on a supermarket shop floor. The empirical evidence gathered during the months spent working on a supermarket shop floor is used to “extract the general from the unique” and further our understanding of consumption, work and social inequality (see Burawoy 1998). By diminishing the particularities of the field site and my co-workers, I hope to accent the generalities; by denying the recognition of the site I hope to center the reader’s gaze on the research and analysis. The use of pseudonyms for the food retailing corporation and the people I encountered in my study maintains the anonymity of the field site.

As noted above, explanations of the supermarket jargon used throughout this dissertation can be found in Appendix A. Learning the lingo of the shop floor, i.e. the vocabulary of selling, enables employees to establish group membership as an employee and demarcates boundaries between themselves and the others – the customers. Like learning any language, mastery took time. My field notes reflect the difficulty I had when I began my work and the competency I felt after a few months of experience. Retail jargon started appearing in my notes as I commented on being interrupted from “facing” to go find something in “backstock” when we were really “slammed” on a Tuesday night.

## CHAPTER TWO: RESEARCH METHODS

This chapter provides a discussion of the particular form of ethnographic method employed in this research as well as the details of the techniques used to gather data, the process of analysis and what I consider to be both the benefits and limitations of this type of research. The project began with the realization that the lack of empirical evidence in sociological writings on consumption, globalization and late capitalism seriously limited our understanding of the social practices and processes involved in the “producing consumption” (see also Clarke 2000), particularly the intersections between corporations and individuals. The re-conceptualization of consumption as something that is produced through interaction, rather than as a linear movement (*from production to consumption*), suggested a methodological approach that was more engaged than interviews and observations of shoppers and incorporated the lived experience of bureaucracy.

An overview of the U.S. food retailing industry grounds this study though what has been largely overlooked in this history is the changing role of the shop floor workforce. The dissertation provides significant empirical data gathered from a supermarket shop floor to illuminate the integrated, experiential routine of doing retail work. I began by spending many hours doing shopping observations in supermarkets in the urban area where I eventually conducted my field research. Preliminary in-depth, open ended interviews with highly-reflexive food shoppers indicated that even the most “expert” supermarket shoppers had simplistic and naïve understandings of the ways in which the

food system operates, particularly the role of large corporate food retailers. These interviews reiterated Dixon's (2002) findings in her study of Australian chicken meat consumers and it became clear that the strategy of interviewing customers was not aligned with the inquisition into the role of the supermarket in the U.S. food system. At the same time, I was inspired by Miller's work on supermarket shopping to think beyond the oversights and limitations of his study: "that which is made explicit in discourse is clearly quite contrary to the ideologies which remain implicit in practice" (1998:72). After conceding to the limitations of the interviews, it became obvious that if I wanted to understand the intricacies of supermarkets, I needed to unfettered access to the shop floor. By becoming a retail clerk in a large, corporate supermarket, I could immerse myself in the lived experience of corporate food retailing. A position on the shop floor would allow for the observation of the multiplicity of relationships that occur in the supermarket amongst the workers, customers, products and the supermarket itself.

The methodological approach was approved by the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and declared exempt from the federal guidelines governing human subjects participation. Accordingly, I was not required to obtain written consent from those I observed and interacted with in the supermarket as my research relied on "serendipitous conversations" that I both heard and participated in. Maintenance of the exemption was predicated on limiting my actions as a *researcher* in the supermarket to observing and participating in situations in which my colleagues would similarly be able to reasonably position themselves, i.e. I could not ask research questions on the shop floor or attend meetings with managers that I might not otherwise have

been privy to. I was allowed, however, to complete all of the tasks assigned to me as an entry-level retail clerk and make note of my experiences and observations. This boundary enabled a focus on the shop floor and the steady gaze produced more detailed observations of myself and others and, then, a more nuanced analysis. Not being “out” as a researcher allowed me to be a worker. My scheduled shifts allowed me to stay on the shop floor for eight hours a day and the conversations I overheard were audible to others as well.

In order to protect the identity of the individuals, as well as the retailer, included in this study, all names have been changed. Distinguishing characteristics have been altered as little as possible, but always with the maintenance of anonymity as the priority. All names used herein are pseudonyms.

### ***Labeling the study***

This dissertation is unique in both its approach and its scope when contextualized within the sociological tradition of ethnography. Institutional ethnography provides grounding for the methodological construction of the research and allows for the incorporation of the skills, processes practices involved in “doing work,” rather than focusing solely on the explicit mandates of wage-work (Diamond 2006; Smith 2006; deVault 2008). Institutional ethnography is a sociology of everyday life and supermarket shopping an entirely mundane activity. The activities that occurred on the shop floor happened during the moments when workers were “employed” by the retailer yet reach far beyond training manuals and programs. Skills, management, and



sociability networks developed almost in spite of the retailer rather than because of it.

The approach I refer to as “reflexive participant observation” allowed me the methodological freedom to use my experience as a supermarket shop floor clerk to construct a better understanding of doing retail work. The experiential nature of being both a worker and a customer allowed me to capture the interconnections between myself and the research yet should not imply a lack of objectivity; although they are my observations, they are not about me, *per se*. To the contrary, reflexive ethnography makes the presence of the researcher explicit within the analysis rather than centering the experience as a personal one.

Like Ehrenreich (2001) and Williams (2006), I was not attempting to live solely off of my earnings, but neither were many of my co-workers who had co-contributors to their household incomes. Unlike Ehrenreich and Williams, I did not have an additional professional salary and the miniscule amount of money I was able to contribute from my fieldwork did markedly supplement my household income.<sup>8</sup> I was also a real Ph.D. candidate and it was clearly listed on the print resume that I was able to successfully deliver to my future manager as well as entered into the online application under “highest level of education.” Though this cannot be taken as a formal statement of my intentions to do research on The Supermarket while working, it does illustrate a consistency in my determination to present myself as factually as possible.

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<sup>8</sup> Although I did not have an additional source of income, my family had health insurance coverage through the university. I was, therefore, not dependent on the job at The Supermarket for health care.

Of those who asked me about my studies, none expressed a familiarity with sociological analysis and none cared to know more (see also Wacquant 2005). I was never asked what I was studying for my dissertation although I was prepared to deliver an honest, succinct response<sup>9</sup> should the issue arise. I was asked, as I discuss in the text, about very intimate details of my personal life but they almost always dealt with my relationship to my husband and parents and I answered honestly, with reserve, as I would respond to a new acquaintance with no primary ties. The exemption from the oversight of the university's IRB required that I not ask my co-workers direct research questions and I took this mandate seriously. I kept my inquisitions to work related matters and never asked a co-worker to "tell me more about that." On the rare occasion that I would encounter someone I knew in the store who was aware of my research, I would greet my friend as usual. This was the most obvious marker of my self as different than my co-workers (see the discussion of friendships in Chapter Eight) yet occurred so rarely and in such a fleeting manner that it was never seen as a discrepancy in my behavior.

I wanted to be an employee. In contrast to ethnographies where the researcher was "out" and allowed to work at the fast-food counter, gaining experience *as* a worker, earning my position as clerk allowed me to *be* a worker. My "entry" into the world of food retailing was mediated by the online hiring program used by The Supermarket and the face-to-face interview with my potential bosses and little assisted by my status as a doctoral candidate. I

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<sup>9</sup> Early in my field research I contacted Christine Williams to inquire how she had handled the inquiries of her co-workers during her participant observation in toy stores. Although she had not been asked about her background and studies she advised me (in a personal email) to prepare an honest, clear one-line sentence about my research. I was never asked about my studies and I never delivered the line.

would argue that my experience as an employee would be hindered had I obtained the job in other manners. (See Leidner 1993; Reiter 1996; and Sallaz 2005 for discussions of entering the site top-down; see Ehrenreich 2001 and Williams 2006 for discussions of entering the site bottom-up). I was an employee: I was scheduled like an employee, treated like an employee, assumed to be an employee, and I was able to accomplish this by becoming an employee.

My goal with this research was to use my sociological imagination to capture the experienced social reality of working in a supermarket. The inclusion of the body, as the being, in this study allowed for the inclusion of the physical, mental and social complexity of retail work. Although not as physically demanding as the training, resistance and usage of Wacquant's (2004) body in his apprenticeship to become a boxer, the incorporation of the body, not merely the self, allows a similar expansion of sociological research to include the embodiment of social life. The inclusion of the body should not be conflated with auto-ethnography, an ill-defined genre in itself, argues Wacquant (2005), that deals with the experiences of the self rather than strategically uses the experiences of the self to highlight larger social issues. The distinction is in the body and perspective – the body as *experienced* and an internalizing perspective of the personal is auto-ethnography; the body as the *experiencing* and an externalizing perspective is the basis of the reflexive ethnography.

Apprenticeship, as experienced by Wacquant (2004) in his ethnographic study of becoming a boxer in a gym on Chicago's South Side, was the corporeal

experience of his research. Likewise, for O'Connor (2005), learning to become a glassblower allowed her the reflexivity of the development of experiential knowledge, not solely the ability to blow a wine goblet. In both studies, the presence of the researcher was fundamental to the study. Likewise, in this study, it was my own presence in the supermarket that provided the empirical data that allowed for the construction of the theory. I was a real supermarket clerk, in body and in practice and gained entry to my research site by being hired based on my own competencies and abilities. I presented all required data as factually as possible with no obvious oversights<sup>10</sup> yet never actively engaged in disclosure about the job as a form of participant observation for my dissertation research.

The incorporation of the body into research provides a useful substantiation of the intentionality of research. I was present at all times, my actual physical body as well as the more temporal aspects such as personality and emotionality. When I was kind to my co-workers, / was being kind. When I became irritated, it also was expressed as / would express irritation. My co-workers did not interact with a façade of me, they interacted with the actuality of me and in this sense there was no deception in our social interaction. I knew very little of their interests and lives outside of the workplace so knowing little about mine was nothing unusual. This point is relevant because it is the forceful reminder that this study is not about the workers themselves, it is about the experience of “doing work” and the social relations involved in

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<sup>10</sup> This varies from the methodology of the journalist Barbara Ehrenreich (2001), who was not subject to IRB oversight and therefore could edit her resume to omit particularities that she felt would inhibit her ability to get a job.

“producing consumption.” Had I been writing a biography of the lives of supermarket workers my authenticity and motive could be called into question.

I suggest that the social interactions I observed would have occurred in a similar manner had I not been present to observe them. In a store with over 400 employees and thousands of customers it was a very rare moment to be alone with a single co-worker. The presence of a third person (at least), a co-worker or customer, provides situations where I cannot be seen to be the sole determiner of the events that occurred. My personality, present as my body was, also significantly contributes to the issue of trust in the context of this study. In order for trust to have been broken, I would have had to break the implicit social contract between myself and those I interacted with. The social contract between co-workers was based on our interactions, as co-workers. (The exception would be those who socialized outside of the store but the social contract would then become one between friends rather than co-workers.) There is not a social contract of confidentiality between customer and worker and, therefore, providing details of customer service interactions cannot be seen to violate a sense of trust.

Ultimately, the quality and subtlety of my observations lies in my written words. I believe I have portrayed a reality that my co-workers would recognize although the identification might also incur feelings of unease, frustration and anger if the argument that it is retail, not labor, that is benefiting from their long hours and hard work. An analysis of consent and coercion is always morally ambiguous as power is being identified as something larger than individual intention. Accepting my research as reasonable and accurate requires a

reorganization of social frameworks that we, as sociologists, know is not always shared with mainstream thought. It would be ethically dubious for us to expect all of my co-workers to both understand and care about what I was studying and what I have produced. This raises, of course, the relevance of academia and the elitism of the production of knowledge but those dilemmas are beyond the scope of this dissertation.

An underlying assumption of this research is that knowledge is never absolute. The role of the sociologist, therefore, is to develop the ability to observe the social world and to “see” with our sociological imaginations (a la Mills 1959) what others overlook. This can be accomplished in a multitude of ways and participant observation provides only one way of accessing the social reality of the supermarket. This is, however, neither a limitation of method nor material. It can never be truly understood which method captured the moment better – survey, interview, participant observation, ethnography – because no moment can be relived or exposed to numerous, simultaneous, methods of data gathering. Tope, Chamberlain, Crowley, and Hodson (2005) argue that participant observation yields the richest, and most, information, and this neatly supports this methodological approach. Ultimately, however, the ability to produce an efficient, effective, and descriptive sociological analysis rests within the researcher herself.

### ***Where to work***

One overarching requirement drove the field site choice – the supermarket chosen for the study must be a large U.S. food retailer and hold a substantial market share. No food retailer is truly national as food retailing is regional and

transnational yet not national in scope and the food retailing corporation chosen as the field site has stores in many major U.S. markets and overseas. The basic materialities of the stores within the chain – items sold, wages paid, hiring process, benefits, store design – are determined by the corporation's headquarters and there is a high level of similarity amongst stores in diverse markets (as per numerous shopping observations in at least twenty outlets in the U.S.)

Most important, the store studied here was, itself, not unique. In many ways The Supermarket looked just like every other store in the chain. It sold many of the same products (there is a slight variation amongst stores because of the ordering process, this is discussed above), had a typical supermarket layout, and employees were governed by national/corporate rules and regulations. Additionally, the uniforms, bags, product tags and other packaging and branding materials were designed and distributed by the regional and national offices. For this reason, stores were unique only in the slight nuances of their staff and variations in floor plans. Products offered on special (i.e. sale) were mainly chosen at the regional and national level (under nationally produced guidelines) although much of the signage and display were handled at the store level.

An additional preference for a store with an explicitly stated corporate commitment to high quality service was also fulfilled and The Supermarket is highly regarded within the industry and throughout the retail sector as a good place to work. This base level is important when taking the analysis into consideration – the contrast between the claim and the experience is a

substantial part of what is intriguing about this study. If I claimed poor working conditions and low wages in a place known for such things, it would be less of a challenge to rethink the assumptions about “doing work” in the food retailing sector. That my research occurred within the context of a store known for good customer service makes the findings that both customers and workers were often left unfulfilled and frustrated all the more poignant.

The urban location of the store was chosen based on its proximity and the opening of a new store in the area, which I thought would increase my chances of being hired. Although I initially focused my intentions on the newest store, I eventually secured a position in a well-established store nearby. Details of the research site can be found in Chapter One.

### ***Field notes***

Data for this study derive from field notes taken as a participant observer at The Supermarket. From the moment I began applying for jobs through my final days as a shop floor sales clerk, I accumulated over 300 single-spaced pages of notes. I wrote field notes (see Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995) after every shift and because I was encouraged to keep a pad and pencil with me in case I needed to write down a customer’s request, I was able to make notes on the shop floor without drawing attention to myself. I also jotted down reminders while in the bathroom and while taking breaks.

The sheer intensity of learning to do retail work dominated my field notes until I acclimated to the position and was able to focus on anything other than making it through the trials of each day. Often, like Sherman (2003) notes in



her dissertation about luxury hotel workers, “the logic of the job takes over and I forget to take notes” (p. 138). There were days where I couldn’t write another comment because it was taking all of my energy to not quit a job that was physically exhausting, mentally challenging and emotionally draining. When I learned how to deal with the necessary, although negative, aspects of working retail, my analytical abilities returned and I was once again able to chronicle my experiences<sup>11</sup> of the “ongoing social act” in which I was participating (see Smith 2005).

At the end of my tenure at The Supermarket, I read my field notes and “rediscovered” the information gathered during my time on the shop floor (Smith 2005). I then manually coded the field notes following the basic outline of Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) open, axial and selective coding process that allows for the configuration, diagramming and construction of theoretical foundation. During the open code phase, I coded the notes by paragraph, listing interpretive categories and subcategories, and then constructed a master list of themes. When I reached the end of the notes, I recoded them according to the master list; if the code and the recode differed, I reexamined the paragraph and I was able to code all notes without further issue. During the axial coding phase, I sorted the paragraphs by category and then read each collaged document as its own genre. Through a “trial and error” of processing and logic diagramming emerged the sections contained in the dissertation. The final selective coding phase elaborated and refined each argument into the completed chapter.

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<sup>11</sup> Langer (1989) would argue that the exhaustion was, in part, due to the exertion and effort to become mindful after a lapse into the mindless state of being.

### ***Additional research***

In addition to the hours spent working on The Supermarket shop floor, additional observations were made during weekly shopping trips to other stores in the chain (also located in the same urban area). I would always purchase something during a shopping observation allowing me to observe the point-of-purchase interchange at the cash register. I was provided a store identification card when I began working and was able to use the card to receive a discount at any store within the chain. As discussed within the dissertation, my status as an employee often interrupted the customer service script of the cashier and I would have to assert myself as an employee in order to distract her from insisting on my swiping my card (credit cards were often assumed although cash based sales appeared to be equally common). This raises the issue of insider/outsider status.

### ***Insider/Outsider***

I was able to be both an insider and an outsider at The Supermarket. While I was wearing my work apron I was assumed, correctly, to be an employee and customers, employees and management interacted with me uncontested. At times I was told I “looked the part” of an employee working in my department and this was said both as a compliment and insult. To my knowledge, the legitimacy of my employment was not questioned and the overall heterogeneity of the staff afforded me anonymity. The removal of the work apron acted as the toggle between employee and customer and the store was large enough that I was often assumed to be a customer while shopping during a break time. It would take repeated mentions of my employee status to

stimulate an unfamiliar cashier to accept my identification card in order to receive the employee discount.

My (unintentional) ability to be seen as fulfilling both roles significantly contributed to my ability to immerse myself in my field site. Successfully looking the part of employee allowed me to fit in, *au naturel*, and enter the site unchallenged. Looking the part of customer allowed me to be inconspicuously present on a different supermarket's shop floor. Unlike the occupation-based determinism in Bourdieu's (1984) analysis, the workers at The Supermarket were not immediately recognizable as such, particularly without their identifying aprons.

Although I fully immersed myself in my position as a shop floor clerk, I retained my credentials as an academic and the promise of an alternative career path. I bracketed my academic perspective, although it is a differentiating factor, and tried to "see" from the perspective of my co-workers, many of whom felt they did not have other opportunities. Many of my co-workers knew I was "in school," and some even knew I was in graduate school, but no one seemed to particularly care. Why we each chose to work at The Supermarket was never discussed (see Williams 2006 for discussion of a similar lack of interest). As Williams (2006) argues, "In the world of low-wage retail work, no one assumes that people choose their occupations or that their jobs reflect who they really are" (p. 19).

### ***Reaching saturation***

Working on the shop floor at The Supermarket was one of the most trying jobs I have ever experienced. Years of previous retail experience did not prepare me for the brutality of dealing with a dismissive public sector in a large, corporate store. The toll on my body, a decade older than the last time I worked on my feet, was immediate and intense. The impact of the denigration by the customers was felt with an equal force and it took weeks to acclimate to interacting as a retail clerk and not take customers aggression, rudeness and dismissal as personal insult. I refused to quit before finding a way to manage the stress, anxiety and complications that arise from doing customer service work in the retail sector. I wanted to leave the position with a feeling of accomplishment and mastery. I wanted to fit in and be successful – my co-workers handled the stress and I needed to as well. Supermarket work is not as dangerous as mining and it is more prestigious than fast food work, yet this makes it, in itself, neither easy nor pleasurable. Workers, myself included, were able to find satisfaction working at The Supermarket but it was almost always despite the store rather than because of it.

I knew I had reached saturation in my experience when I ceased to shiver at the thought of going to work, again, and learned from my co-workers the ways in which to produce and reproduce my body and my self in order to be a successful worker. Like Wacquant (2004) learning the pugilistic arts and O'Connor (2005) learning to blow glass (however poorly she appraised her own goblet-making), I became proficient at my chosen craft. Co-workers would ask me for help when they did not know how to answer customer's questions; managers would leave me to complete a task with a modicum of instruction.

When I do my own grocery shopping I reflexively *feel* what it was like to be on the other side of the counter, although without my apron I am treated, again, just like any other customer.

I gave my employers more than the standard two week's notice and they responded to my intended departure by throwing me a going away party. It was a surprise and I was so touched by their continuing generosity of spirit that I immediately burst out into tears as I recognized all that I had truly gained from the experience. When I stop by the store for a shopping observation, I recognize some of the workers and have the opportunity to catch up on life events. The relationships I developed while on the shop floor never extended outside of the supermarket but do still remain there, on the shop floor.

### ***Methodological limitations***

My positioning on the supermarket shop floor afforded me the opportunity to observe the interactions between the employees, the customers, the products and the retailer. What has emerged in this dissertation is but one aspect of that multi-faceted relationship from the perspective of the worker. The experiential data gathered from *being* a worker illustrates the complexity of doing low-wage service work and the “lived experience of bureaucracy” in a way that other forms of inquiry cannot. The perspective of this research is of the worker. Although a sociologist *in* the supermarket, I was a worker when *on* the supermarket shop floor. Future studies of the food retailing industry will continue to add much needed evidence to theories of the sociology of consumption, work and retail.

No study can construct a definitive reality and this research, similarly, has its limitations. Rather than viewed as defects or flaws, the limitations should be understood, instead, as the particularities of this ethnography. This is neither a study of consumer choice nor a study of labor, and it purports to be neither. What it is, and what I argue it accomplishes, is an analysis of the process of “producing consumption,” understood as the process of stocking the supermarket shelves, staffing the store, and the management of the self and others while “doing work” on the shop floor.

Analysis of the experience of bureaucracy *across* organizations would further contribute to an ideal type analysis of consumption. Learning to become a proficient retail worker required the presence of my body and mind, within the context of a supermarket, and it is a logical extension to presume that time, space and context would produce variable results. This is not to suggest that this study is insufficient – to the contrary, because the mark of saturation in my field research was proficiency *as compared to my co-workers* and it thus provides a useful ending point for research. The means to the ends, the processes and practices of embodiment may prove more fruitful than the ends themselves.

Over time, multiple ethnographies will construct a history of retailing to understand how the processes and practices involved in “producing consumption” vary across space and throughout time. There is nothing particularly new about the trials of retail and consumption (MacLean’s early study of department store workers is from 1899) but I argue that there is something new about the current ubiquity of low-wage interactive service work.

Furthermore, concentrated and consolidating retail sectors have significantly contributed to disparities in economic, social and cultural capital. The ideology of a consumerist society requires the foundational promise of individualism that allows for a theoretical dismissal of the social – low(er) wages (especially when inflation is taken into consideration), decreasing benefits, and longer hours become all the more acceptable when corporations are seen as beneficent rather than despotic.

## **CHAPTER THREE:**

### **THE RISE OF THE SUPERMARKET SUPERPOWERS**

This chapter synthesizes the rise of the supermarket superpowers into three distinct phases of growth in order to better understand the rise of the supermarket superpowers and the changing ideology of food retailing. The phases are not mutually exclusive periods, but rather, the “moments” when the trends are most evident.

Phase One is the origination of the supermarket – the introduction of self-service, high-volume, low-cost selling and the technological advances that enabled these changes – and the resulting supermarket boom of the 1930s. The “boom” continued through the 1990s as food retailing corporations continued to concentrate and consolidate in order to increase the overall volume of their sales. Phase One comes abruptly to an end with the FTC’s regulatory tightening and retailers refocusing of their efforts on vertical, rather than horizontal, growth.

Phase Two emphasizes a focus on quality rather than quantity and sees retailers negotiating vertical relationships with manufacturers (capable of producing private-label goods) and customers (providing lifestyle stores with a wider variety of goods for a differentiated customer base).

Finally, Phase Three begins in the early 2000s with the broadening of the retail sector in both scope and scale. The flexible production schedule demanded by the rise in private-label goods such as prepared ready meals necessitated a



new type of manufacturing and retailers have been instrumental in developing a new, high-risk type of production facility. Furthermore, the scale of previously regional food retailers has been expanded globally and although no retailer sells *within* every U.S. market, the majority of retailers sell *outside* of it.

### ***Phase One: The supermarket boom***

The “supermarket revolution” of the 1930s began with the novel idea that in order to increase sales volume and profits, prices needed to be lowered and bigger stores built (Mayo 1993; Humphery 1998). The supermarketing strategy was epitomized by the concept of “one-stop shopping”: a large store that sold meats, produce and non-food items with self-service aisles and a location just outside the city center (Bowlby 2001; Sarkar 2005). Customers were intrigued with this new retail approach, but as Humphery (1998) argues, it was more than the low prices that drew them in. They were attracted to “the new *culture* of grocery shopping, a culture that emphasised choice, independence, convenience and pleasure” (p. 69).

Technological innovations such as gondola (free-standing) shelving revolutionized the shopping, and retailing, experience. Rather than shipping food to a warehouse for storage, the food items were delivered directly to the supermarkets and placed on the large shelving units within the shopping space, rather than on storage shelves in a private backroom of the store (Mayo 1993). By reducing the storage of extra stock, the costs of operating a warehouse (rent, insurance, labor and trucking fees) were also cut. Contemporary discount stores such as Sam’s Club and Costco have taken this

innovation to an extreme by keeping large quantities of saleable stock on the sales floor and precisely scheduling deliveries.

These new practices of grocery shopping encouraged an already rising dependence on cars as shopping trips became larger and site specific and necessitated a way to transport bulk purchases to customers' homes. Customers reportedly *enjoyed* the new experience of waiting on themselves (Bowlby 2001) and flocked to the new supermarket stores. Their willingness to transport themselves and their purchases engages them as very active participants in the culmination of the food distribution process. In essence they become unpaid transportation workers and supermarkets use this free labor as a means to increase profit. As customers became more mobile and driving longer distances accepted as a part of modern life (Clarke 2000), they were no longer as bound by distance to a particular supermarket. The rising rates of car ownership inadvertently complicated the customer-retailer relationship. It is important to note that these changes may not have proliferated if there had not been such a strong, positive response from customers; the sheer force with which they are reported to have embraced the supermarket is remarkable. Similar excitement has been reported when private supermarkets open in former state controlled territories (discussed below).

Supermarkets became larger in size and overall population and by 1940 there were over six thousand stores across the U.S. (Tedlow and Charvat in Humphery 1998). Although many retailers had shunned the new store format they ultimately succumbed to the transition in order to stay in business (Mayo 1993; Bowlby 2001) – by the 1950s the supermarket format had become

ubiquitous within the industry. The food industry is unique in that the profit margin for food items is razor thin and food retailers are typically unable to raise, or lower, prices. To increase profit, they are instead forced to increase their sales volume or cut other operating costs, for example cutting labor costs by creating self-service aisles (Bowlby 2001) or lowering transportation costs by consolidating locations. Supermarkets also use consolidation as a means to maximize profit, and the supermarket boom grew through a multitude of mergers and acquisitions as the food retailing industry was shaped not by changes in store layout or shopping behavior, but by corporate takeovers and unstable oligopolies (Mayo 1993). Growth through mergers and acquisitions is a less risky venture than new store development because of the higher capital investment needed to build new stores and establish a customer base (Kaufman 2000b). Furthermore, it can take up to two years for a new supermarket store to begin showing a profit whereas an existing store should already be profitable.

The retail industry is a slow-growth industry if measured as growth in sales over time. After adjusting for inflation, sales grow at about 1 percent a year, about the same as population growth (Kaufman 2000a). The difficulty in increasing sales again influences the impetus to lower costs through consolidating. Theoretically, retailers can pass along the savings gained by leveraging their buying volume for lower prices, but the dearth of empirical evidence about the topic suggests otherwise (Clarke 2000). Large retailers also cite the ability to create exclusive partnerships with manufacturers as a benefit of consolidating. One precondition of the partnership is that advertising costs, everything from in-store promotion to special packaging, typically shift

from the retailer to the manufacturer (Kaufman 2000a). This ability to influence the purchase and sale of food products is evidence of the shift of power within the food system to the retailers (Clarke 2000; Burch and Lawrence 2005).

The final boom of Phase One occurred during the late 1990s with a wave of mergers and acquisitions that quickly enlarged the market share held by the top 5 food retailers in the U.S. by over 50% (Wrigley 2001; Schwartz and Lyson 2007). As regional chains continued to be bought by larger firms, the supermarket-scape became dominated by two major chains in the U.S.: Ahold on the east coast and Fred Meyer on the west coast (Wrigley 2001). Both extended their reach within the corporate landscape, but neither was (or has become) a truly national chain, selling in all regions. The late 1990s also saw a series of mega mergers between the leading firms themselves: Kroger merged with Fred Meyer and Albertson's with American Stores. The mergers solidified Kroger's ranking at that time as the top "traditional" supermarket corporation and American Stores (now Albertson's) place as the second largest food retailing corporation in the country.

Phase One ended with the Federal Trade Commission's (FTC) regulatory tightening. In 1999, Ahold, the fifth largest grocery store chain in the US at the time, withdrew from negotiations to acquire Pathmark over opposition from the FTC. Wrigley (2001) notes that rather than ending all prospects for growth, the tightening encouraged retailers to instead turn their attention to out-of-market acquisitions. For example, Ahold has acquired U.S. Foodservice, the second largest food distributor in the U.S. and Peapod, an established on-line food retailer. These two acquisitions resulted in concentration in the number of

firms controlling consumer access to food products although this deal marked one of the food retailing industry's first entrances into vertical investment.

The supermarket boom of Phase One with its emphasis on growth is replaced by the focus on quality that is emblematic of Phase Two. Supermarkets have always had to consider basic issues of food quality, but the focus in Phase Two becomes the retailers' determination to differentiate themselves based on the ability to offer high quality products and services, in addition to the now ubiquitous tenets of low prices and one-stop supermarket shopping.

***Phase Two: The shift from quantity to quality***

Phase Two emerged in the late 1990s as the food retailers began shifting their focus within the store from *quantity* to *quality* (Busch and Bain 2004). The supermarket corporations began differentiating themselves from one another based on types of products and services offered in order to draw customers, since prices could not be lowered any further and the supermarkets were losing customers to warehouse stores and discounters (Morganosky 1997a and 1997b; Newman and Cullen 2001). During Phase Two, supermarkets reconstructed themselves as trustworthy "brands" and, as Dixon (2003) notes, identifying themselves as reliable authority figures, perfectly suited to alleviate the confusion (mainly created by the corporate food industry itself although also a necessary part of consumer capitalism) about appropriate food choices (Bauman [1990] 2001; Nestle 2002).

The entrance of non-traditional food retailers such as Walmart<sup>12</sup> and Costco strongly impacted the food retailing industry and begun pulling customers away from the long-standing food retailing giants such as Kroger and Safeway (Morganosky 1997a and 1997b; Hollingsworth 2004). The competitive new food retailing environment prompted the traditional food retailers to diversify their strategies and focus on quality: offering a wider variety of types of foods and services, managing store image, and negotiating brand development. Supermarkets became experts at conveying their own importance to an unsure consumer base and concurrently respond to and create consumer demand. They have managed, as Burch and Lawrence note, to foster a public belief in the supermarket as the “gatekeeper of food, nutrition and quality” (2005:9).

Dixon (2003) argues that the corporate constructed confusion about diets has created a space for supermarkets to emerge as authority figures. The reflexive consumer has power, she argues, but is searching for and ultimately finding clarity in the market-based authority figure of the food retailer. The supermarket is the primary source for the acquisition of food items by consumers and food retailers have the ability to shape demand through pricing, product offerings and placement. In a study of chicken meat consumers in Australia, Dixon (2003) found that the relationship between producers and consumers was almost completely negotiated by large food retailing corporations.

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<sup>12</sup> Walmart very quickly rose in ranks, from the 1990s when they first entered food business, to being ranked fifth largest food retailer in 2000,<sup>12</sup> to leading the rankings in just five years (Urbanski 2000; Tarnowski and Heller 2004).

The food retailers, she states, have also used their administrative staffs to forge “authority relationships.” The administrative staffs negotiate with rational-legal authorities to gain authority by association. They also create and manipulate brands in an effort to create consumer loyalty in a constantly fluctuating market (Pritchard 1999). Further, they renew the charismatic persona of the retailer through constant communication of their image to consumers, shareholders, and manufacturers. They become omnipresent by focusing on appearing responsive at all times, flexible yet secure in their capacity to succeed. Again, the intangible image becomes judged as more important than the tangible goods available. The third function that the staff serves is to constantly recreate culinary cultures and provide foods in line with customers’ particular lifestyles.

The quality of food items becomes perverted by their specificity and perceived appropriateness as well as their location in a store with an image congruent with their self-image or the image to which they aspire (Devlin, Birtwistle, and Macedo 2003). Supermarkets are going to great lengths to identify themselves with images of quality, for example, Safeway’s new specialty store format called the “lifestyle store.” They are also positioning themselves as a friendly helping hand and Phase Two reverses one of the major trends of Phase One: rather than outsourcing labor costs to the customers in order to lower costs, supermarkets begin doing more labor in order to “help” customers and as a means to increase profit.

Phase Two is witness to the increase in supermarkets prepared foods to either eat at the store or take home to reheat or finish cooking. There has been a

substantial shift in the amount of food consumed away from home and the chilled ready-to-eat meal (such as a pre-made sandwich, dip, or salad) is the largest product category of private-label goods (Harvey et al. 2001; Burch and Lawrence 2005). The chilled ready-to-prepare meal (such as raw seasoned chicken breasts or cut-up vegetables for a stir fry) is also gaining popularity and these prepared and semi-prepared dishes are frequently sold by the supermarkets under their own private-label (the “branding” can be seen on the price labels or the packaging itself).

Supermarkets also began competing directly with traditional brand manufacturers rather than existing as the juncture between producers and consumers (Burch and Goss 1997) – they began building their own brand image to sell to customers (Busch and Bain 2004; Burch and Lawrence 2005; Codron et al. 2005) in the form of processed packaged goods such as salad dressing and canned fruits and vegetables. In Australia and the UK, retailers gained control within the food system in the 1990s through the introduction of private-label goods (Hughes 1996; Pritchard 1998), and they often occupy more shelf-space than comparable branded foods (Busch and Bain 2004). They first emerged in the 1970s in the UK and “reflect the shift in the locus of control over the supply chain which accompanied the end of post-war rationing and resale price maintenance” (Burch and Lawrence 2005:5). In Britain, the high end chain Marks and Spencer sells only private-label goods, a trend that is just beginning to be adopted in the U.S. food retailing market.

The private-label market in the U.S. has only recently begun to develop and be exploited as a source of competitive gain for the food retailers. The private-



label products currently gaining market share are different from generic (no label goods). Generics are typically marked based on only their contents and their primary feature is their low price. Generic brands were first introduced into American supermarkets in the late 1970s and became immensely popular over the next few years. Supermarkets rapidly developed aisles specifically designated for the generic foods, but they disappeared equally quickly as the economy improved (Mayo 1993). Contemporary private-label goods are marked with the food retailer's brand and retailers are invested not only in the potential success of the particular food item, but the overall success of their brand. No longer merely lower priced versions of brand-name foods, private-label goods have become innovative market segment leaders and everything from canned corn to watermelon salsa is produced under a supermarket's private-label. Rising advertising costs and technological innovations like cable television and video-recording devices have impacted the marketing ability of the traditional brand name food manufacturers and contributed enough instability in the market for private-label products to gain a strong foothold on the established brand-name bestsellers (Hughes 1996).

Most supermarkets are now outsourcing the production of their private-label products, focusing their attention on the management of their brand and leaving product sourcing and development to a manufacturing corporation. Supermarkets have both responded to changes in lifestyle and eating habits and validated a demand that they created in order to maintain or increase their profits. The food retailers, Burch and Lawrence (2005) argue, have reconfigured manufacturing by underwriting the establishment of new types of food manufacturers who can quickly respond to changing consumer tastes,

whether demanded directly by the customer or mediated by the retailer. Where the Phase Two of the rise of the supermarket superpowers melds into the Phase Three is through supermarkets' reconfiguration of supply chains and changing manufacturing practices (Burch and Lawrence 2005). This new manufacturing sector will be discussed next.

### ***Phase Three: Dual trends – Outsourcing and global expansion***

Phase Three is marked by the broadening of the retail industry in both scope and scale. The expansion of food retailers' offering of private label goods and the concurrent increase in demand for flexible, adaptable and innovative goods (Burch and Lawrence 2005) is the stimulating force driving the broadening of the scope of food retailers' and a fundamental characteristic of Phase Three. Traditional brand manufacturers were not well suited to meet quickly and constantly changing consumer demands, taking up to two years to move a new product through development and onto the supermarket shelves (Harvey et al. 2001) and food retailers funded and fueled a new type of manufacturing. Phase Three is marked by a second supermarket boom as regional, large corporations become extremely huge transnational corporations with global investment strategies. Investment by existing retail chains in developing countries and former state controlled economies is growing rapidly (Reardon and Swinnen 2004; Reardon and Timmer 2005) and changing the shape of the global food and nutrition system.

Food manufacturing is entering a new phase of practices marked by flexible production, and a number of new food manufacturing corporations have emerged to meet the increased demand for private-label items (Burch and

Lawrence 2005). Typically, brand manufacturers introduce four to five products a year, in contrast to private-label manufacturers that introduce around a thousand per year with a research and development phase as short as two weeks (Harvey et al. 2001). This flexible production schedule is emblematic of Phase Three. The new manufacturers produce few, if any, products under their own name, but are guaranteed retail shelf space because they are being contracted by the supermarkets themselves (Burch and Lawrence 2005). They are designed to respond to changing demands and this flexible production schedule impacts the labor force and technology systems.

This shift in manufacturing is also a shift in financial risk and responsibility away from the retailer. During the consolidation period of Phase One, retailers forged exclusivity partnerships with manufacturers and outsourced their advertising costs, including in-store promotions to special packaging to the brand manufacturers (Kaufman 2000a). Just as the supermarkets were able to force the brand manufacturers to absorb the financial risks of advertisement, they have now forced the new manufacturing sector to absorb the costs and risks of product development and sourcing. The large food retailers were again able to leverage their buying power to maintain control as the gatekeepers of the food system. This type of business relationship puts the private-label manufacturers in a precarious situation; they have a steady source of business only until the supermarket decides to procure their goods elsewhere. Then, since the manufacturer has no established retail product of its own, there is no contract, no buyer, and no revenue. The supermarkets financially control the private-label sector, and have gained further leverage within the food system

by outsourcing not only the production of the goods, but of the risks, responsibilities, and costs of food production.

### ***Global expansion***

In order to increase their scale of operations, many of the leading global food retailers began investing heavily in markets in developing countries and former state-controlled economies (FSCEs) as their relative domestic markets became saturated (Reardon and Swinnen 2004; Reardon and Timmer 2005). The most recent “supermarket revolutions” are foreign direct investments that are spreading an “industrial culture” of retailer-manufacturer relations (Hughes 1996) with retailers at the helm.

Supermarket corporations are venturing into the newly opened economies because of the low risk involved once the market is opened to foreign direct investment. This exported “supermarket revolution” is a very different type of growth than the U.S. experienced during Phase One when existing food retailing chains grew slowly through mergers and acquisitions over decades to become the major supermarkets.

The “supermarket revolution” in FSCEs happened extremely quickly and moved through three distinct waves of saturation (Reardon and Swinnen 2004). The first wave, which was the most rapid of the three, took place in the relatively more urbanized, higher-income areas with better infrastructures. The second wave diffused the supermarkets into the second tier areas in terms of levels of urbanization, income and infrastructure. The third wave has recently begun and sees the “supermarket revolution” entering into poorer and/or less

urbanized areas. The third wave also consists of penetration into areas that had previously had significant policy obstacles such as China, eastern Turkey, Morocco and Russia.

The rise of supermarkets in these FSCEs has followed similar patterns of market saturation to the entrance of supermarkets into Latin America, elsewhere in Asia, and Africa. However, Reardon and Swinnen (2004) argue that the latest “supermarket revolution” of the FSCEs has particular characteristics. The growth of the private retail sector happened very quickly after the economies were opened to foreign investment and many of the FSCEs had no previous foreign investment in retail food stores, and the majority had government controlled food retailers. The transition to a private food retailing sector occurred nearly overnight and the market instantly became saturated with foreign investment. Reardon and Swinnen (2004) note that the private food retailers were quickly embraced by consumers, eager to have more variety and better service, although it has incurred serious consequences for local farmers and manufacturers struggling to meet supermarket’s technological demands. The privatization of the entire food system in these countries occurred swiftly and the impacts of these changes are only beginning to materialize (Reardon and Swinnen 2004).

Phase Three, still nascent, has already seriously impacted the global food system and numerous local food systems around the world. Food retailers not only operate supermarket store fronts but also structure supply chains, producer relations and labor, reaching far into the global food and nutrition system. The focus on expansion, in the form of increased control over

relationships with manufacturers and global development marks a new era for the food retailing industry.

### ***Conclusions***

Over the past 75 years the “supermarket revolution” has spread around the world, increasingly globalizing food retailing and instigating shifts in food systems. Unfortunately, there is a scarcity of empirical evidence about the repercussions of the flurry of changes that have occurred within the food retailing industry over the past 75 years (Clarke 2000; Dixon 2003; Busch and Bain 2004; Burch and Lawrence 2005) and this dissertation will add to our understanding of the role of the supermarket superpowers in “producing consumption.”

The beginning of Phase One of the rise of the supermarket superpowers is marked by the growing omnipotence of the supermarket food retailing format during the 1930s-50s. The focus on high-volume selling at low prices prompted supermarket corporations to increase their market share to in order to leverage their large size for lower prices from manufacturers. The end of Phase One saw a multitude of mergers and acquisitions in the 1990s that dramatically and swiftly changed the corporate food retailing landscape.

Phase Two emerged in the late 1990s and is marked by a significant shift away from the focus on growth within the food retailing industry itself towards retailers’ negotiation of vertical relationships with manufacturers and customers and a focus on their own brand image and the development of quality goods for a differentiated consumer base. The increase in private-label

goods that often carry the “brand name” of the supermarket became a profitable venture for retailers. The rapid growth of this burgeoning field of retailer driven production marks the transition from Phase Two to Phase Three. The concurrent trends of sector and global expansion are inherent to Phase Three. Retailers are entering new territory, both figuratively and literally, as they exert their authority over the production, rather than distribution, of consumer items and the construction of new stores in FSCEs.

The supermarket has developed from a novel selling strategy to a formidable force in the global order; in less than a century the food retailing industry has gained both power and authority and developed into one of the most influential institutions in society. The food retailing industry has become an “institution operating on an unprecedented scale” (McMichael and Friedmann 2007).

The history of the rise of the supermarket superpowers helps us better understand the complex processes entailed in the development of food retailers as dominant forces within the larger food and nutrition system. The economic growth of the sector enabled food retailers to use their size to leverage negotiations on their terms and they have become the gatekeepers of the system, tightly guarding and restricting access literally (markets) and figuratively (conceptions of work, health, choice). The environment constructed by the retailer in which the customers, employees and products interact creates a space where the food retailing corporations, again, emerge as legitimate authority figures.

## **CHAPTER FOUR:**

### **STOCKING AND STAFFING THE SUPERMARKET**

#### ***Stocking The Supermarket shelves***

Customers on the shop floor cannot see the arrangements that got a box of cereal onto a particular shelf, the handful of food manufacturing and processing corporations that produced the majority of the food in the store, and the role that the retailer has played in limiting options to the products that can be delivered according to their schedule, their pricing and their demands. “Producing consumption,” particularly the stocking of the shelves, can be understood through the unveiling of the processes involved in constructing the concept of “choice” within the food retailing industry.

Customers enter the store with a set of differentiated desires, whether they make purchases or not, and have a set of options – the products available on the shelves – from which to choose. They are really only able to choose, or not choose, from what is available and the structure of that set of options was built by the local store buyer who was working with constraints set by the regional buyer, working under constraints set by the national corporate office. The Supermarket’s national buyers are influenced by “food brokers” who represent a variety of products and brands and advocate for their inclusion in the corporate sanctioned ordering book. The Supermarket customer, therefore, may be choosing between red and green apples, but the store has chosen whether they came from NY or Fiji.



Products that do manage to make it on to the shelves are then orchestrated into particular spots constructed specifically for them. It is not accidental that certain items are at eye level or foot level. The decisions of what went where at The Supermarket were made beyond my reach and I was told where to put particular things and never felt it was my place to challenge these directions. Some items were in spaces negotiated by the “reps” (product representatives who were possibly a food broker, but some lines handled their own sales) for particular product lines and I was able to observe some of those negotiations. The reps would come in every week or so and provided a variety of services such as ordering products, cleaning the display, and organizing the products on the shelves. They would negotiate the product line being sold with the buyers and often were very versed in the politics of getting particular items on to the shelves and to the customers.

Reps were quite skilled at encouraging the shop floor clerks to sell their products. By offering information seminars to the clerks, as well as snacks and free samples, they fostered a positive association with the product line regardless of its “usefulness” or “quality.” One rep was known for not providing free samples and a general air of negativity regarding the products traveled throughout my department. And those employees who did receive samples from her (myself not included) were seen as skilled negotiators and both revered and resisted for their adept ability to get what others could not. Another product line was so effusive with its samples that it had the opposite effect and samples sat unclaimed and it was understood to be inferior despite many employees’ unfamiliarity with the items.

The Supermarket, like many leading food retailers, sold a variety of private-label goods under a hierarchical banner of store brands (see Harvey et al. 2001 for a discussion of private-label pizzas and stratified consumption). The Supermarket packaged everything from milk to cookies to toilet paper under its own label and, generally, the products sold well. Private label goods gained a significant amount of shelf space while I was working in the market.

Sometimes it was at the expense of a branded product that was not selling at the expected level and was removed from the shelf, but often products were pushed closer together in order to get a larger variety of items on the shelf even if there were fewer of each product (meaning they would have to be restocked more frequently). I was told, “off the record,” on three separate occasions and by three separate managers, the name of the manufacturing company of some of The Supermarket’s most popular private-label products. In each case it was a well-known national brand manufacturing producing goods to be sold under The Supermarket’s private label and in one case the contract was “beneficial” to the customer because it could be sold for much less than its branded counterpart due to the promise/actual bulk ordering.

The role of third party endorsements and labeling must also be acknowledged when discussing the construction of options and the issue of “supply.”

Celebrity endorsements often stimulated sales and requests and it would be clear that a product had been mentioned in a mainstream media outlet when sales would unexpectedly increase by a hundredfold. During my tenure at the supermarket, I witnessed customers requesting items they read about in popular magazines, saw on a talk show, saw listed in the local newspaper, or read about “on the internet.”

The most common question from a customer looking for assistance choosing a product was “which is the best seller?” The desire to believe that the most popular decision is also the best decision belies the notion of a postmodern differentiated customer base and indicates a privileging of the economic over the social, cultural, environmental, or even personal by the customers as well as the retailer. This focus on sales constructs a particular array of options on the shop floor and items not selling as quickly as their counterparts were removed from the shelves creating a store stocked with *popular* items rather than a store stocked with *quality* items. Although the stated intention of modern supermarketing is a focus on higher quality goods, in practice supermarkets remain driven by a focus on quantity.

### ***Staffing The Supermarket***

Staffing The Supermarket, like the stocking process, was equally hierarchical and centralized. The hiring process for many service work jobs has become a streamlined rationalized procedure as retailers announce a vacancy on their website, accept online applications and schedule scripted interviews with a select pool of potential new employees. From the perspective of the *employee*, however, it is a long, complex, and often frustrating ordeal that only occasionally results in being offered a job. The experience of the hiring process has been largely overlooked in many studies of work and this chapter seeks to illuminate the experience of getting a job in a large, urban supermarket by giving recognition to this overlooked perspective (but see Ehrenreich 2001).

The hiring process can illuminate many of the ideal characteristics of the modern low-wage service worker. The questions on the application itself, the materials requested, the length and breadth of the process contribute to the concept of “ideal worker,” as much as the actual workers themselves. The application process also gives us a glimpse into the negotiations that happen, both subtle and overt, between the employer and the applicant. It is during this process that the boundaries of the position are drawn, whether they are upheld in the reality of the position or not (as discussed in the following chapters on service work on the supermarket shop floor.)

The grocery sector employs over three million workers and is one of the largest employment sectors in the U.S. (Food Marketing Institute 2009). This statistic does not represent, however, the number of applications for each position that is currently held or the complexity and struggle of employees to get those jobs. As the food retailing industry continues to concentrate, hiring practices of these mega-corporations evolve to handle the influx of hundreds of thousands of applications. Many large retailers, not only supermarkets, have outsourced much of the hiring process to a third party companies in order to lower costs and decrease turnover (and its associated costs). Employ,<sup>13</sup> the company hired by The Supermarket to assist with its hiring needs processes millions of applications for only tens of thousands of jobs each year – an approximate average of 25 applications per position. Although unclear how many applications each job seeker submitted, it is clear that that experience with the mediated hiring system reaches far and wide into the American labor force.

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<sup>13</sup> Employ is a pseudonym for the corporation and will be used to protect the anonymity of the field site.

In an industry with relatively high turnover (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010), the goal becomes hiring employees who will stay in their positions. These employees may be proficient at their jobs, or not. They may enjoy the work, or not. The main promise of Employ is that new hires will stay. This “workforce in captivity” creates a labor market that is somewhat docile if not entirely capable. As worker retention, and hence profits, continue to be the goal and there continue to be more workers than actual jobs, we will see the creation of labor market that fulfills little more than the profit seeking intention of the retailer.

Although the hiring process begins, in theory, with the sight of a “Now Hiring” sign (now it is more likely an online post), continues with the completion of an application, and ends with a successful interview and job offer, in practice it is not as rationalized a process as it is purported to be. As this chapter illustrates, each stage is incredibly nuanced and the ability of the job seeker to successfully navigate the steps is dependent not only on her own ability, proficiency and promise but also the fluctuating whims of the retailer, the variations of the workers, and the vicissitudes of the economy.

The Supermarket where I eventually received a position processed all applications through an online system run by Employ. They listed available positions on the store’s website and I applied four times over the course of several months for three front-end cashiering positions and one shop floor sales clerk position at multiple stores in the same urban location. Years of experience in the retail sector including tenure as a front-end cashier in both high school and college did not seem to flag my application in a favorable

manner. I represented myself accurately on the application and included my education and status as a graduate student. These characteristics did not ultimately inhibit my ability to become employed and my assertion that it was my performance on the standardized personality assessment that was discouraging my application seems supported by the evidence.

I was able to complete the entire application online after identifying the job I was interested in applying for on the “Jobs” section of the corporate website. The first stage of the application for The Supermarket requires the applicant to input answers to basic questions about contact information, work status (legal to work in U.S.) and job history before asking for consent for a criminal background check (which is stated as not automatically disqualifying the application). The second stage of the online application is the hallmark of the Employ hiring system: a tailor-made personality assessment that is used to assist retailers in identifying successful job candidates.<sup>14</sup>

My field notes express my frustration with the personality assessment and a quick Google search of “hate” and “Employ” produced over 10,000 posts of similar sentiment. At the beginning of the test, I was instructed to not spend too much time thinking about each question and to answer honestly and quickly. Many of the questions were oddly worded and I had difficulty deducing the meaning of vague statements such as “When people make mistakes, I correct them.” I did not know if I was responding to a question about people or mistakes and if I Strongly Agreed, Agreed, Disagreed, or Strongly Disagreed. Frustration with the test appears to be a common sentiment among

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<sup>14</sup> Employ presents itself as beneficial for employees by “helping” them find a job they are well-suited for.

anonymous applicants and over 30,000 results appear for a Google search of “Employ” and “Answers” and out of frustration and desperation I turned to some of them for assistance. (The recommended answer to the mistakes question is listed as Strongly Disagree.) The notes below were written before I turned to the Internet for coaching:

Certain questions were really easy for me to answer, but after discussing those answers with friends, maybe my answers still weren’t the right ones. “You got mostly good grades in high school.” Strongly agree! For the most part, I got great grades . . . I was quite secure in my answer to this question until a friend mentioned that maybe my answer would mark me as [an overachiever] doomed to disappointment in a part-time wage job. Crap. If I got that one wrong, what did my answers to the rest of the questions tell them?

The question that provoked me the most intensely is discussed in this excerpt from my field notes:

“You know if someone is in a bad mood, even if they don’t show it.” I have read on some Internet sites that the answer is Strongly Agree, but I would like someone to explain to me how exactly they know that someone is in a bad mood. “I can just tell” is the typical answer from friends, but when pressed further, they all say something like “well, people kinda pout or act differently.” They are showing it, I inquire? Yes, they sigh, realizing that although I can’t pass a simple personality test, I can be relentlessly irritating. If they are not showing it, and you are determining the state of their mood with no empirical evidence, you are a jackass.

My responses to the assessment during the first three applications (none of these resulted in an interview) encouraged me to believe that my responses to the assessment indicated that I was not an appropriate candidate for the positions. The hiring software analyzes the responses and produces a printout with the employee’s demographic information and their evaluation as a

potential new hire. Green light approval gets the application to the top of the virtual pile (it is mostly done by email) although a yellow light indicates that the hiring manager should proceed with caution and often illuminates areas of the application that should be probed further (Overholt 2002). A red lighted application is typically discarded automatically.

One of the stated benefits of using the Employ hiring software is to reduce turnover and it is possible that my application did not portray the image of a long-term employee who would be satisfied in an entry-level position. Although this conclusion validates the touted advantages of the electronic application, it minimizes the ability of individuals to be in control of their employment and assumes a stasis that does not allow for personal growth and development. Also of note is that an employee's tenure in the position has little to do with job satisfaction or level of customer service. Reducing the judgment of "successful" service workers to those who stay in their positions compromises the role of the individual. Interestingly, it also contradicts one of the implicit tenets of low-wage service work – interchangeable workers are assumed to be able to adequately perform the highly rationalized work yet the assessment works on the assumption that not all applicants are equally equipped with the appropriate skills. What is more interesting is to examine the employees who do successfully negotiate the application and their ability to successfully do supermarket work.

One executive vice president for store operations at a large footwear retailer posed the obvious question – when 70 to 80% of applications get the green light, why interview someone who receives a yellow or red light (Cha 2005)?



The predictable and seemingly logical answer is that you don't – you cull employees from the most "qualified" group of those who have received a green light. What this overlooks, and actually denies, is the potential of yellow- and red-lighted workers to develop into green-light workers over time with on the job training and experience. It is, yet again, the contradiction of low-wage work – unskilled workers need to be skilled at being unskilled. The personality assessment did not request information about work experience, per se, but many questions were about interacting with non-friend others and those abilities are often developed at work. Personality, as indicated by the test, is something inherent to each particular individual and not something that can be influenced and developed through experience. The preference for personality over ability and experience not only categorizes potential hires but also inhibits their experiential learning process of figuring out what type of work they prefer or dislike. The presumptuousness of the retailer to know better than the actual employees, which positions they are best suited for, is the first devaluation of the individual in relation to the corporation.

One of the most basic aspects of getting a job is inquiring about an application and it is also the most complicated. Access to managers at The Supermarket was difficult to obtain, and because they are often the only people who know if the store is actually hiring, uncertainty ruled the process. Engagement with employees at the physical storefront is actively discouraged and retail job seekers are encouraged to pursue opportunities only through the corporation's website or the in-store kiosk.<sup>15</sup> Although I was never explicitly told, once

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<sup>15</sup> An in-store kiosk is provided for applicants who do not have computer and/or Internet access and potential employees can often be seen milling around the machines waiting their turn to create their application.

employed, to dissuade potential job seekers from talking to any of the store managers, it was understood that we were not to bother managers with inquiries about available positions. Depending on the approach of the job seeker and the attitude of the employee, inquiries were met with a shrug of the shoulders or directions about how to find the application on the store's website.

After completing each application online I went to the respective store with the intention to follow-up by leaving a resume and cover letter. My field notes mark my dismay at how I was treated at each inquiry and illustrate the larger socialization already at work in the process to become an appropriate retail employee.

I asked [a sales clerk on the shop floor] if I could leave my resume and cover letter with her to give to the [manager] of the department. She said she couldn't do that because it isn't how you get a job . . . I asked if I could leave my things to have on file, to supplement my application and she responded that they would call me after I filled out the application. I asked if I could fill it out even if they weren't technically hiring and she asked me how I would know if they weren't hiring if I didn't fill out an application. The next few minutes were more of the same back and forth, trying for clarity, but feeling more like I was in Alice's wonderland.

Making it through the application process was a test in itself and one that required skills that are not obvious or innate such as access to and comfort using a computer and being able to speak, read and comprehend English. The process of rationalization creates a series of predictable expectations about the hiring process (see Weber 2001); it *must* happen this way because this is the way I have been led to believe it should happen and because this is the way that I (successfully) experienced it, therefore this is the reality of the hiring

process. At its best it creates an equal playing field with everyone being given the same access to the job. At worst, it reinforces inequality by privileging a particular type of knowledge and skill over others, particularly knowledge of and subservience to the corporation. The employees who shamed me for thinking I could act differently and not follow the “rules” as they had done were sanctioning my behavior and, in essence, preparing me for the ultimate subordination of the self to the retailer.

I also experienced a positive yet ultimately fruitless interview at another supermarket chain.

I am off to [Grocery Center] today to apply for a job. Their process, according to the website, takes place in person – they want to meet their applicants. I am not sure if that is their screening process, or it just cuts down on random applications that someone fills out at 2 in the morning when they think maybe it would be fun. I suspect that they will make me take the same personality test, but I suppose we will see.

I was asked to fill out the application on the spot and told that I would receive a phone call within 48 hours if they were interested in having me come in for an “official sit-down” interview. It lasted about twenty minutes and I thought it went well. The woman who interviewed me was probably ten years my junior, enthusiastic and chipper. At the end of the interview she assured me that I would be getting a call back in the next day or so and that hopefully I would begin working soon. Feeling disappointed that it wasn’t my top choice of stores but elated to finally be making some progress getting a job, I anxiously awaited the arrival of the call. On the second day I called to check in only to find that the manager was “out.” I called again on the third day and was told to

call back later. Needless to say, I never received an offer of employment despite my multiple phone calls.

The frustration of not getting a much coveted supermarket job was exceeded by the frustration with being ignored and denied an understanding of the decision to not offer me employment. The disregard for applicants and the treatment as someone unworthy of acknowledgment takes a larger toll than hurt feelings. Once a position is secured, the validation as a worthy worker is internalized. The risk in this is that the insecurity and the affirmation are both heavily constructed, intentionally or not, by a corporate entity with goals of profit rather than human services.

Ironically, the job I was able to obtain was the one in which I overtly flouted the “rules” and managed to successfully submit my resume to a person (I did double check if I could submit the documents during the online application process and there was no opportunity to attach miscellaneous items). By resisting the socialization to comply with the implicit expectations of the hiring process, I was able to secure the coveted position. When I went in to drop off my resume, I also shopped for a few items and while walking around the store, caught the attention of one of the employees and told him that I had applied for a position online and that I wanted to drop off my cover letter and resume to make it a bit more “personal”:

I asked if the manager was working and if I could drop off the paperwork. He [a salesclerk] took me to the front desk . . . and tried, unsuccessfully, to get the attention of a woman talking with another employee. I said I didn’t mind waiting for her to finish her conversation and he walked off. The woman I was waiting for informed me, after I told her the details of my visit, that I would need to speak to another

woman, who was downstairs just then . . . I asked if I could leave the materials with her, and she agreed (easily) to take them and promised that she would pass them on.

I received a call a week or so later inviting me to come into the store for an interview. It is possible, of course, that I would have been called for an interview regardless of dropping off my resume. When I arrived for my interview with the manager and assistant manager I spotted my resume in her folder; confirmation that it had been delivered to her. The interview lasted approximately twenty minutes and we discussed my availability/schedule, previous work experience and how I would handle a confrontation with a co-worker. Overholt (2002) suggests that this type of “follow-up” question may have been prompted by the assessment software itself: as research for an article she was writing on Employ she applied for a position at a retail store and discussed the process with the manger in charge of hiring. Eerily familiar, the software suggested the manager ask Overholt about how she handled a recent conflict. My response to the inquiry was that if I needed to discuss something with a co-worker I would give myself a chance to gather my thoughts and then suggest we have a discussion off of the sales floor away from the customers. I guessed that the manager was looking for cues that I could stay calm even when frustrated and would not provoke conflict in front of customers. Ironically, The Supermarket had few private spaces off of the shop floor where these conversations could happen in private and some of the biggest conflicts occurred not between co-workers but between customers and employees (see Chapter Six) who did not have the option to move their conversations elsewhere.

I felt positive after leaving the interview and received a call a few days later offering me the position. The next step was to wait to be scheduled for orientation and I received that call while out of town for a holiday. I was able to schedule the orientation for the next week and officially started work more than a month after submitting my application.

The length of the hiring process for entry retail level clerks at The Supermarket varied from several weeks to a few months. From the day I applied to the day I started working was approximately five weeks, and it was one of the shortest waits. A co-worker I met during the store orientation had applied in November, was interviewed for a different store, never called back until late June and then she had called every day to make sure she was going to get scheduled for orientation in order to officially start working and earning a much needed paycheck.

Turnover among supermarket employees is relatively high<sup>16</sup> and when I return to The Supermarket for shopping observations, I see mainly new faces I do not recognize. After I left, two assistant managers that I had worked with were transferred out of the store (one to another store in the same position and one demoted and moved to another store). An employee transferring from a different department in a different store filled my vacated position and others in my department left for personal, family and economic reasons. The rate of turnover, however, does not illustrate the length of time it takes to acquire a position by an average job seeker. The lengthy application process requires

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<sup>16</sup> Approximately 25% of The Supermarket's employees, throughout the company, will voluntarily leave (quit) each year. The national statistic, across all industries, is approximately 1.5% for voluntarily separation (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010b)

potential employees to be flexible with both their time and finances. Weeks between jobs can mean weeks between paychecks. Often, when employees were terminated or quit, they would feel obligated to take the first job available and did not have the luxury to take the risk to wait to complete the hiring process for a more “prestigious” position. This finding both substantiates and contradicts the conclusion of Williams and Connell (2010) that upscale stores prolonged the interview and scheduling process in order to ensure the “correct” presentation of their workers. The length between application and hiring, they argue, eliminates workers who are dependent on their income and privileges those who will project the correct brand image (see Pettinger 2005a). Although they found a shorter hiring process in the lower-end stores, it is interesting that the example they provided to illustrate a longer wait is also a supermarket.

Why I was unable to secure a position sooner cannot be determined with any certainty. Williams (2006) notes that she didn’t get hired for a particular toy store job because she was “not young enough and not hip enough” (p. 193) while Frankel (2007) suggests that he was not making it past the online assessments because of his “background and relationship to work,” i.e. the test accurately reading that he was interested in more than working and did not have a conducive personality. Because I never made it past the online applications, my appearance could not have impacted the success rate of my application. I was hired for the only job at The Supermarket where I got an interview.

My first conclusion about why I was not hired sooner is based on my difficulty with the personality test, as discussed. Unfortunately, I was unable to keep my answers to multiple tests to see which questions I answered differently during the successful attempt. The position I was able to obtain was the one where I was able to supplement the rationalized hiring process in a more traditional manner. Although I have strong math skills and actually do enjoy cashiering (not a common preference), applying for a sales clerk position may have also benefited my application. Front-end cashiers seemed to come to their positions with more, and more recent, retail experience.

Another reason I had difficulty with obtaining a job is my lack of recent experience with the specific and particular type of work. This is the contradiction of supermarket work – workers are required to have experience for positions for the inexperienced. Employees in my department already knew how to participate as workers in a structured organization. They knew there were written rules that would govern their behavior and unwritten expectations about how to do work. For example, although there were written rules about the type of clothing appropriate for working at The Supermarket, no one challenged the underlying informal norm of wearing clothing in public. More specifically, although there were no written rules regarding identifying customers versus employees, the vast majority of workers were able to swiftly and accurately identify who was who. This knowledge is entirely engrained, and like the socialization of one into the constant engagement with “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987), it appeared to be a concretized element of the shopping process.



Ehrenreich's (2001) analysis of why she may not have been hired is applicable to this analysis as well – a white woman with graduate school training may be perceived as drunk, desperate or weird for applying for low-wage service work jobs in areas (mostly large urban areas) where the majority of those positions are held by non-white immigrants. She was steered into particular positions such as waitress and away from others such as housekeeping just as I could not obtain an interview for front-end cashiering jobs but did receive an interview for a more “prestigious” shop floor sales position. It is impossible to determine why I got one position and not the others but my race, gender, age and education cannot be dismissed entirely. There is, finally, the possibility that my responses to the test accurately indicated that I would be unsatisfied with an entry-level retail position and soon quit.

Other studies of work in the retail sector have overlooked the hiring process or done work as researchers, first, and employees, second, and therefore not gone through the official processes of obtaining a retail job. Possibly if Williams (2006) had not so easily passed her personality test at the Toy Warehouse she would have written more about the constrictions of the reductionist application assessment. The perspective of the management represented in Talwar's (2003) study of the immigrant workforce in the fast-food industry commented that their staff needed to represent the neighborhood the best it could. This “matching” did not seem to be a priority for The Supermarket and the staff, by definition, earned considerably less money than their neighbors and often commuted an hour or so to work each way. Unlike studies of fast-food workers in which the employees are earning *more* than the neighborhood residents (see Newman 1999), workers at The Supermarket

workers earned a much lower salary than the majority of the local customers shopping at the store.

The socialization process to become a good supermarket employee began during the application process as I was trained to negotiate my own desires within the context of the expectations of the retailer. What appear to be simple misunderstandings on my part, for example trying to drop off the paper resume and cover letter, actually illustrate a raw retail employee who has yet to fully consent to self-subordination (Sherman 2007). In order to work as an entry level clerk, one must subjugate personal expectations and desires. To successfully maintain the position one must follow the routine as set by the retailer, constructing a sense of self as a worker that may or may not reflect the self as self (see Leidner 1993).

A presumably unintentional outcome of the anonymity of The Supermarket's hiring process is that the individual applicant, as a unique human being, is devalued. This becomes the first lesson in the suppression of the individual for the sake of the bureaucracy. If you cannot agree to the terms of the hiring process your ability to maintain your position will be seriously hindered by the assertion of your self, also known as your reluctance to be flexible and accommodating. Entering a rationalized, highly bureaucratic corporation as a service employee requires a transformation from self to worker and the process begins with the decision to apply for the job. Although the specialized and differentiated consumer has been celebrated, workers are expected to suppress individualization and effectively manage themselves and others, as will be discussed in the following chapters.

## ***Conclusions***

This chapter has illuminated some of the complexities involved in stocking and staffing the supermarket. Retailers act as gatekeepers at the main intersection of consumers and the food system. By directly mediating the relationships between producers and final food customers, supermarkets exert considerable influence over the items available in the “election.” The hierarchical system of stocking the supermarket creates a multiplicity of barriers and it is only a miniscule number of products that appear on the shelves. The economic efficiency of stocking items with high sales volume creates a food industry based not on quality (as described in Phase Two of the retailing revolution) but economy of scale. This evidence complicates current assumptions of the role of the *customer* in the food system. The hiring process, as experienced and understood from the too often overlooked perspective of the employee, furthers our understanding of the processes and practices involved in the staffing of the supermarket. The application process is just the first moment of the demand for flexibility from workers (as well as manufacturers) and the following chapters elaborate the management of the self and others required to do retail work.

## **CHAPTER FIVE:**

### **MANAGING THE SELF – DOING PHYSICAL WORK**

The management of the self is the totality of skills required for an employee to keep her corporeal body and mind under her own control. This includes everything from dressing appropriately for the workday to forming strategies to combat boredom and exhaustion. The task of being physically present is a complicated assumption of “doing work” and one that is fraught with social tension and inequality – workers are not all equally able to be present. Learning to “do work” requires a tremendous amount of mental dexterity, and supermarket jobs are neither low-skill nor appropriate for all interested workers. Although corporate bureaucratic jobs have been rationalized to the extreme, the human workers filling those positions are much more diverse and temperamental and written rules and regulations, therefore, vary widely in expression.

When studies of work contrast various types of jobs, they overlook the expression of work that exists as the relationship between the employee and the position. By examining the process of “doing work,” the complexity and nuance of these millions of retail positions can be illuminated. We can then begin to build a better understanding of the realities of work and the social repercussions of low-wage work on the physical and mental wellbeing of the American workforce.

The splitting of these sections into the management of the self and the management of others is merely a heuristic to stimulate discussion. There is,

of course, no sense of self without others and managing relationships with others is a component of the management of the self. Chapter Five details the management work done by the self and on the self, regardless of whether it was done in reaction to others. Chapter Six involves the work done, by the self, in order to manage (the interactions with) others.

### ***Doing physical work***

The physical aspect of retail work encompasses both the strain on one's body (muscles, joints, etc.) and the demands of one's actual presence – the requirement that your body must be at the work site and not elsewhere. Once hired, employees are subjected to a trial period during which they can be dismissed without notice and without reason.<sup>17</sup> Acceptance of this tenuous relationship is mandatory to begin working at The Supermarket and acknowledgement of this policy had significant potential repercussions of the worker's "self." Learning to manage the self became a highly engaged activity because mis-management during the trial period could result in termination rather than a written or verbal warning. Hours worked during the trial period were counted towards the required number needed to receive benefits should the employee remain employed a year later. Being present after the trial period was not a guarantee of job security – the department manager and co-workers were allowed a significant amount of input regarding an employee's official hire making those first months precarious and humbling.

Schedules and wages thus become tangible and can be understood not only as inherent components of all jobs but the physical expression of the modern

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<sup>17</sup> During this trial period employees are also "allowed" to sever their ties to the retailer without giving the proper advance notice.

American ideology of work. The demand for the employee's presence is often not rewarded with a respect for his material comfort. The Supermarket exerted a considerable amount of control over one's presentation of self and had strict regulations concerning attire and footwear.

The physicality of retail work was nothing new to me. Most of my adult life has been spent working in some aspect of retail – cashier, waitress, or bookseller. Maybe it was the return to the sales floor in an older body accustomed to academic work, but the months spent doing this fieldwork were the most intense retail experience I have had. It may have been the realization that it was not a part-time job and that while I was working at The Supermarket, it was not only my research but also my career. I approached it as such and incorporated (somewhat unconsciously) my role as retail clerk into my entire identity. Learning how to adapt to the job and how to adapt the job to your own body was an integral part of the acclimation process. Younger employees were maybe more brash in how they lifted objects and what they carried but the older employees took more care to use the carts or have someone help them lift. By the end of the workweek, whether it ended on a Friday or a Tuesday, almost everyone was exhausted.

### ***Appearance and attire***

Employees had significant freedom of choice over the clothing and shoes they wore to work as long as the store manager felt that those choices conveyed the positive and pleasant atmosphere that was central to the corporate interest in portraying the identity of the organization. There were rules covering the aesthetics of clothing (shorts and skirt lengths, types of shoes and visible body

piercing (only one per ear and the occasional nose); there were no regulations or provisions for attire that would benefit one's physical wellbeing. Protective gear is often provided for employees working with caustic chemicals or loud machinery, but the ubiquity of retail work and the normalcy of the retail environment seem to have inured us to the harsh realities of standing on concrete floors under fluorescent lighting for eight-hour shifts.

The ultimate management of the physical body is the control of natural body odors occurring from sweat and/or filth. The employee handbook notes that many customers are sensitive to strong smells and therefore no smell (perfume or body odor) should be overly strong. The handbook states that it is up to the management of each individual store to decide what is the appropriate "presentation of self." My field notes document a meeting when a worker criticizes another for the scent of his body:

Neil reminded everyone about body odor and personal hygiene. It was obviously directed at Josh, but it was a bit over the top. Seriously, the man just smells like he doesn't wear deodorant, which is perfectly natural. It doesn't bother me in the least.

There was no discussion of this matter at the meeting and because it was so vague it is unclear whether the person intended to receive the message actually did. I do note whom I thought it was directed at because I had overheard previous conversations about the matter. As the excerpt below indicates, I was very sensitive to the smell of the storage areas and break room:

I had to stop in yesterday to pick up a schedule and it was a completely different feeling entering, going downstairs and then walking back out.

The smell of the store is starting to really take a toll on me and I find myself hesitant to go down in the basement, anticipating the smell . . .

The smell was a combination of food, cleaning materials, cardboard and people and I can still recall the feeling of hesitancy expressed above. I would quickly acclimate to the smell and it wouldn't bother me after being at work for 15-20 minutes. My acclimation to the odor of the store did not appear to be a major concern for my co-workers and bosses and I rarely mentioned it although occasionally it was sometimes remarked upon by co-workers when entering the back areas of the store.

The style of dress amongst the employees reflected the diversity of the workforce; attire ranged from the latest trend amongst teenagers to non-descript, neutral colors worn by many older employees. Often, "good" clothes were taken off before a shift and employees would then spend time in the bathroom changing outfits before leaving for the night. Like the fast-food workers in Reiter's (1996), Newman's (1999) and Talwar's (2003) studies, The Supermarket workers would never leave the store wearing the corporate uniform. Unlike the fast-food workers, however, it was less a sense of shame of being seen in the uniform than the maintenance of the boundary between work and non-work time. Employees were required to have their aprons on (and tied) before clocking in for a shift and were not allowed to remove the apron before clocking out at the end. Although it took only seconds to put on and/or remove an apron, the control exerted by the corporation over the movements of the body were strongly felt by employees. Shift times were standardized throughout the store and there was often a hustle to get to the time clock within the acceptable window (clocking in a few minutes prior or a



few minutes post did not result in a penalty), yet I rarely witnessed employees inappropriately dressed for work. The threat of the sanction, real or imagined, was strongly felt and employees unconsciously contributed their own time to the corporation by agreeing to begin “doing work,” i.e. wearing the apron, before being paid for their time.

The outfit I wore to my first orientation session turned out to be technically inappropriate work wear:

I learned that the outfit I wore today was entirely inappropriate. The test for an acceptable top is to raise your arms – if you can see your armpits, it isn't allowed. Nor your belly. Shoes must have both closed toes and heels and you have to wear socks or stockings at all times. You can wear any type of pants, but if you are going to wear shorts, they must be khaki/cotton twill and long.

Due to state and federal health code regulations my outfit violated the technical restrictions for appropriate dress. The style of the outfit, however, was appropriate and met the requirements for the presentation of The Supermarket's unified, aesthetic look. My overall style seemed to indicate to other employees that I was in an appropriate department. From that first orientation session to my last day, when I mentioned which department I worked in I was looked-over head to toe and told, “hmmmm, of course you do.” My actual physical characteristics are relatively non-descript, but there was something about my style of dress that indicated a sense of proprietary belonging despite any actions of my own. Ironically, I actually looked nothing like the majority of the employees in my department and have only height and eye color in common with most of my female counterparts. Although I was, on average, about ten years older than many of my co-workers, I do look like a

few of the other employees in the store and some of the customers. I was actually told that I “looked the part” many times. This phrase was sometimes used as a welcoming compliment indicating that I already appeared to fit in, but more often it was said as a distancing insult indicating that some of my co-workers felt that my appearance might be privileged over their skills and experience.

Visual representations of appropriate patterns for pants, shorts and skirts were tacked up on a bulletin board and all corporate mandates about attire were positioned as guidelines for representing the correct “Supermarket style.” Regulations on patterns, length of skirts and shorts, and types of fabrics appropriate for working were intended to encourage employees to dress the part and hinted that you could be yourself, but not too much. Employees were encouraged to express themselves through attire as long as their outfits stayed within the constraints of the company’s expectations. The minimal uniform intended to suggest a more unique supermarket experience. By allowing employees to express their own style, they were hoping to counteract the otherwise homogenizing force; they presented a visual *mélange* of workers to suggest an equally diverse array of food options and obscure the increasing concentration of food manufacturing, production and retailing.

I was required to quickly learn how to put together an appropriate outfit for work and was able to purchase sneakers to cushion standing on a concrete floor for hours on end. The ability to accurately gauge my wardrobe is not one that should be flippantly overlooked. Many co-workers were forced to wear oversized corporate t-shirts during their shifts instead of the shirt they thought

so nicely coordinated with the rest of their outfit. And many employees, living paycheck to paycheck, were unable to purchase more comfortable shoes or more appropriate shirts. We have come to expect retail workers to be in some sort of uniform and often forget how uncomfortable they can be. I was greatly relieved to be able to wear my own clothing. I was also relieved to be provided an apron to wear over my own clothing to protect from spills, dirt and basic wear and tear.

All employees were required to wear an apron with the company logo and a button with the logo and our name.<sup>18</sup> This minimal uniform actually allowed me to keep some of my personal belongings with me rather than in my locker (food, cell phone, money, ID card, pen) and protected my clothing from the various liquids, pastes and dirt that accumulate in a supermarket. Having the apron on indicated, to customers, employees and myself, that I was “doing work.” It became the switch that allowed me to mentally toggle between being a clerk and being myself. I never wore the apron outside of the store and I was never allowed to work without an apron on.

The apron was, first and foremost, a branding and labeling tool of the retailer. By putting it on at the beginning of each shift, the employee was consenting to the work agreement and illustrating support, as an acknowledgement at the minimum, for The Supermarket. Furthermore, this physical representation of the retailer by the willing employee marked the boundaries of a particular group of people and reinforced the role of the customer as the others, and vice versa.

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<sup>18</sup> I worked under my real name and, as far as I know, employees were required to list their “official” name on their name tags.

Walking through The Supermarket as a branded, marked body allowed customers to identify the appropriate people to ask for help. Based on the thousands of customer interactions I experienced and witnessed, it also indicated to them someone in a subordinate position and their tone, speech and maintenance of their own bodies often conveyed an overwhelming sense of superiority. The physicality of the employee was superseded by the meaning imbued by the apron and any eccentricities of the person were overshadowed by the expectations customers had for the role of The Supermarket employee.

### ***Movement***

One of the most immediate impacts of my new work reality was the pain I felt throughout my entire body trading my desk chair for standing up for four hours at a time. Like the older “dinosaurs” in Talwar’s (2003) study of fast food workers, my body resisted the relentless physical demands of interactive service work in the retail sector. It took a few weeks but my body eventually acclimated to standing for such an extended period of time although sitting down at the end of shift, or during an unexpected meeting, provided a thrill of relief until my last day.

It is difficult to compare the physicality of supermarket work, in general, to other forms of physical labor such as construction, welding or farming. When supermarket work is categorized as retail work, however, the actual labor performed by the employees is assumed to not be *as physical* as jobs that require corporeal skill and technique. To the contrary, the basic act of standing for consecutive hours requires a readjustment of one’s body to the particular

constraints of movement of The Supermarket shop floor, as noted in the excerpt below:

The job is not as mentally difficult as physically. I can figure out the register, but standing up for 8 hours and bending down/standing up takes its toll. My feet hurt, my legs hurt, and my lower back hurts. . . . When you are putting things on shelves and/or facing, you must often bend, squat, twist, all while trying to not knock everything off the shelves.

Though never explicitly stated, the main job requirement is the ability to stand up for continuous periods of time. Co-workers who were able to get through the hiring process still crumbled under the pressure on their bodies.

Specialized footwear was available to members of particular departments such as produce, seafood and meat, but typically not for those working with a cash register. The pain I experienced in my legs and entire body after working the first few shifts had me seriously considering whether I would make it through the course of my fieldwork. Had I needed the job for financial reasons, I would not have had the luxury of contemplating my personal needs. Proper attire eased the impact on my joints and the store provide additional measures, but there wasn't a day that I finished a shift and felt great.

My body slowly acclimated to the work and after a few months I found myself "doing work" without giving it a second thought. The learning curve was steep and unpacking boxes of heavy items requires eye-hand coordination that I did not find to be a natural skill. Experienced stockers can complete the process more efficiently, more quickly, and with less bodily harm but apprentice clerks suffer paper cuts, bruises, strained muscles as they learn to handle their bodies appropriately.

The physicality of the job was most striking at the cash register. Although cashiering does not require the heavy lifting of stock room or the dexterity of butchering, it is the space in the store where the structure most inhibits freedom of movement. It is also a space where the physical constraints impact one's ability to perform the mental labor demanded when working with money. The field notes reflected the disappointment my co-workers and I felt after a renovation to our department.

I am shocked at the lack of ergonomic design that went into the counter space for the registers. A store that focuses on customer service has revealed its bottom line driving force spirit in a design that does not meet the needs of the people providing that service, the workers. Although the depth of the counter has improved, putting people's items in the bags has become infinitely more difficult and requires much more bending. Also, getting to the cash drawers requires bumping co-workers and is quite obnoxious. . . . There isn't enough room for bags, the receipts print out in a spot where it is difficult to grab them to hand to the customers, and there is nowhere to store the merchandise customers decide they no longer want or even extra cash-register tape. The lighting is atrocious.

We knew the register area was being redesigned and all hoped for a place that would be more conducive to the movements of working with money. The counter was equally unpleasant for customers and they often complained about the lack of a place to put their items and their personal belongings. They were particularly vociferous about the angle of the credit card machine and their difficulty using it. MacLean (1899) in a study of department store workers at the turn of the previous century, made note of the deplorable physical demands of working at a cash register. In over 100 years, technology has changed the machinery involved but it has not created a ubiquitous focus on the welfare of the service worker body.

During the renovation I realized how dependent I had become on the supportive floor mats that provided a respite from the unyielding concrete floor. The pressure mats that we stood on at the cash registers were lost during the renovation and we quickly learned how much additional support they had provided. I found working the register miserable without them and was very vocal about locating them and/or replacing them as quickly as possible. The oversight of such an integral part of the workspace was typical, I found.

That I declared myself entitled to the mats was something atypical for me, and for a retail clerk in general. They should have been there and we should have been told to stand on them, but instead I went beyond reasonable measures to get them back. It was the only time I asserted myself so forcefully and actually discussed the problem with the store manager, going over my boss' head (she was not working that day). The mats were eventually located and replaced at the registers but although I found their disappearance unacceptable it was unclear whether anyone else gave it much thought – if the floor mat is missing you must continue work until it is found (not go find it yourself).

There is no social welfare clause in the social contract between laborer and retailer. Co-workers responses were along the lines of “that figures” and this fatalism enabled employees to withstand the pressures of front-line service work by deferring the “blame” from themselves to the corporation; they were in pain not because of their inability to get a better job but because the denial of corporeal comfort is an integral part of retail capitalism.

Cashiers in my department had greater control over their own movements both behind the cash register and within the store. The checkout area was a 10-foot long counter with three cash registers spaced somewhat unevenly. Register 1 was closest to the door and, therefore, either the hottest or the coldest depending on the weather, but it also had the most space and a wall on one side, blocking the possibility of being touched on at least one side of your body. Register 2, in the middle, was the tightest register to work at and the cashier had to deal with people on either side of her, as well as having to move out of the way if Cashier 1 wanted to walk past her. Register 3 had the same traffic flow problem but because it was also located at one end of the counter, working there did not have the same sense of being trapped. Cashier 3 could also easily, quickly, and stealthily slip away should the line dissipate. As most employees strongly disliked working their cashiering shift, this register was quite popular. All three registers had the same set-up:

The cash drawer is located at about knee level, so it requires a lot of bending and strain on the lower back. Many customers put their purchases down (and money too) near them, but since the counter is 3 feet wide, I must then bend to reach for it. [ . . . ] The premier register has such a wide counter that if a customer puts their items down in front of themselves, it requires a bend at the waist and a reach to get them. I noticed shoulder and back pain, so now I ask customers to scoot things towards me. They mostly oblige, although some are obviously irritated.

Employees were not equally adept at working at each register. One employee, a little rounder than the others, was always either being bumped or bumping others if she had to move in and out of Register 1. She and I had a few tense interactions (because of her attitude but compounded by her size) notated in the excerpt below.



I jokingly drew out a little area of my space for Barbara, and her space. Not because she was bumping me, but because she reaches over me to do something on my register before I even have the chance to do it. Her interruptions and patronizing tone are really getting to me and I am unsure of how to approach resolving this. [ . . . ] I was [talking to] a customer when Barbara just yells over my shoulder, “The system is out, it is down . . .” and spouts off some random explanation. I was perfectly capable of explaining what was happening, and the customer didn’t seem aggravated, but Barbara has to speak as if she is the one in charge. I am not sure if she intends to belittle others or if it is just a natural byproduct of her attitude.

This example illustrates the interdependence of physical space and the verbal space to express oneself during social interactions. Emotions often ran high on the shop floor despite the rationalization of retail work. Jealousy, anger, frustration, disappointment, joy, accomplishment were all felt at one time or another by myself and my co-workers. Anger was the trickiest to control on the shop floor, just as it is outside of the workplace. Violence against a fellow employee or customer would be immediate grounds for dismissal but I was often bumped, pushed, and blocked by employees practicing the delicate dance of testing the rules. I once “tripped” and fell into a trash can – assisted by a co-worker so frustrated with explaining a cash register procedure to me that she “helped” me move out of her way.

The linear register set-up of my department (described above) looked luxurious compared to the main cashiers at the front of The Supermarket. They were trapped in a three-foot square box with waist-high counters on three sides. Their co-workers were less than arm’s length to the side, the customers were in front of them on the other side of a counter and managers and other cashiers wandered the body-sized walkway behind them. The proximity of cashiers to one another inadvertently facilitated their

conversations – just as the depth of the counter between the cashier and the customer prohibited theirs. The physical spacing of people, corralling the cashiers and allowing a greater freedom of movement of the customers, reinforced the false separation between two status groups, not merely each role.

### ***Scheduled “flexibility”***

Working a shift is the most physical act an employee performs and being physically present at the workplace rather than somewhere else requires a tremendous amount of effort. Strict work laws limit the number of hours an employee can be required to work per week although employees can be asked to provide their consent to work overtime hours. It is not the legality of the length of the workday that is of note, rather it is the informal expectation of time *given* to the retailer that is striking. Like many hourly wage jobs, supermarket work required workers to clock in not more than five minutes before their shift and be at their work station on time. This seemingly obvious component of a paid job contains an inherent contradiction. “Work” actually begins hours prior to clocking in when an employee starts her day, commutes to the job, puts away her coat, bag and other belongings, puts on her uniform and approaches the clock. It is assumed that this preparatory labor is to be given by the employee to the retail corporation in exchange for the wage they will be earning in the future. Responsibility for managing the time prior to scheduled shift is squarely the employees.

When those shifts are scheduled, however, is typically out of the employee’s control and oftentimes flexibility is demanded from employees, yet not offered

from the retailer (see also Williams 2006 and Williams and Connell 2010). This asymmetrical power over the usage of time is an inherent aspect of the modern retail workplace and “flexible” schedules at The Supermarket provided unpredictable weekly schedules and income for the workers. The hours of the shifts cater to customers and profits, rather than employees and their personal and household needs. The physical demand of labor must be separated from the demands of “doing work.”

If your bus stops running at 10, but your shift doesn't end until 11, you either have to find a new way of getting home or hope that they will allow you to work days. If days are full, you are out of a job. They don't squeeze you in to a day shift to ensure you have enough hours to pay your bills.

The flexibility demanded from workers allows corporations to create work schedules that best meet their needs (Williams 2006) and creates little predictability for the workforce that may, intentionally or not, contribute to the disposability, or at least interchangeability of workers. The focus becomes the *shift* that needs to be filled rather than the *person* who needs to work her usual Tuesday shift – the implicit threat is so overwhelming that it is almost tangible as there are a thousand workers willing to be more flexible who will fill your position should you “need” to leave the company. It is of note that the upscale retail stores included in Williams and Connell's (2010) study of aesthetic labor restricted schedules to the extent of allowing only one full-time worker per store (and full-time was classified as 30 hours per week). The workers in their study had strikingly different motivators for employment and the structure of these jobs highlights the inequality involved in the structure of the access to resources – even if employees wanted more hours and had the availability to work, the shifts would go to another part-time employee.

Being the newest hire, I got what were considered the worst hours – night shifts and weekends. In order to maintain continuous coverage, shifts were staggered into morning/opening, mid-day, and night/closing shifts. There were between two and ten people working in my section at any given time. Sometimes this found us all standing around and talking while at other times everyone was juggling a phone call, a customer in the store and a cart full of products waiting to be put out on the shelves. Most employees preferred the morning and mid-day shifts but used to the late hours of an academic schedule, I was relieved to not have to be at work until well into the afternoon hours; the late nights suited me and I never requested a change. When it was possible, I was given one weekend night off but the schedule put strain on my personal relationships as I was working when my friends and husband were off, and I was off when they were working.

What has surprised me, while rereading my field notes, is the underlying vulnerability expressed in my writing. The wage, the hours, and many components of the job were abominable but my interactions with the people involved in running my department and the corporation, in general, were real interactions with human beings. The passage below illustrates the emotional attachment I developed, somewhat unexpectedly, regarding my job.

I saw my manager yesterday and told her that I was sorry if my email was ridiculous. She said that it was good for her to know what people want, even if she can't always provide it. I told her I would never be angry about getting scheduled for the whole weekend, and she laughed and said she wouldn't think so.

The risk of being fired on the spot was real during the trial period and that possibility weighed heavily on me, as it would mean the end to my position

that I had worked so hard and long to obtain. I genuinely apologized and found myself willingly subordinating my personal need for a day off to see my family for the job.

My manager scheduled a team of over twenty workers and was, for the most part, successful in meeting most individual needs. Scheduling a large group of people, with personal consideration, is always a difficult task. Not all employees were equally “flexible” with their schedules and a few, in particular, met resistance when they requested something particular.

Carrie has been having a really hard time getting the schedule she requested when she interviewed for the position. The days off that she wants are aren't even consecutive or on the weekend, which doesn't seem too crazy to me. But maybe there are people ahead of her with seniority. I am not sure if she burned some bridges or what. She is definitely a goof ball, but from what I can tell, she gets the job done. She is a bit of a gossip, so maybe that has something to do with it. But she is one of the only people who really know about the items and also where everything in the store is located. She might be always talking but she is getting the work done.

The impact of the lack of predictability on personal relationships will be discussed below, but it should be noted here that a schedule request based on personal preference was given significantly less priority than one based on a structural constraint. On an individual level this approach makes some logical sense but the structure of Carrie's job and her inability to have actual face to face interactions with her partner created a very real strife for her. It also became clear that she and I were treated very differently by our boss. As I mention in the field notes above, I found her to be a very capable, thorough and reliable co-worker although that opinion was certainly not unanimous.

Although she was still employed when I quit, she soon left to pursue a different occupation that would allow her to commit more time to her relationship.

In theory, retail jobs like mine are entry-level, low-wage and temporary. Evidence of how they are actually being used, however, indicates a contrary perspective. Regardless, employees, myself included, do not, and I argue cannot, approach these positions as anything other than the stark reality of the present. It may not be the work you aspire to in the future but it is the work being done at the moment and in order to reach that future goal one must strategically manage oneself in the present. Furthermore, the qualities of the position cannot be conflated with the experience of “doing” the work and the meaning it has for the actual employee. The excerpt below documents the response to my request to transition from part-time to full-time status. It also illustrates the emotional attachment I had to my job and the appreciation of feeling both acknowledged and complimented – in essence it is the epitome of “doing work” as it becomes an expression rather than a performance.

[The store manager] asked me if I was only working part-time because I was in school or because I had another job. (Not sure how she knew I was only part-time, as she manages the ENTIRE store.) [ . . . ] Have you thought about working more hours? It would be great to have you! You have a great vibe and I think this is fantastic! You should talk to them about getting more shifts!” I was certainly surprised at her ebullience, we were always friendly when we saw each other [ . . . ] but I had no idea she knew of my “vibe” and that I worked only part-time. I felt both excited at being praised and liked, and also intimidated at the prospect of working more shifts.

I was initially hired for part-time work and requested and received a schedule of three shifts per week. When I requested more shifts this meant it would change my status to a full-time employee. My boss was honest with me that

the commitment would be tenuous and that she needed to “schedule for the needs of the business.” If the weeks’ schedule couldn’t fit in four shifts for me, then I would not be scheduled for four shifts. I did not know – from week to week – if I was going to be allowed to work a full-time schedule. My income was, therefore, fungible and out of my control.

Retail workers not only need to be flexible but also relinquish control of their finances to the person in charge of the scheduling. One of the touted benefits of part-time and/or “flexible” work is that employees can schedule their jobs around their personal lives, including child care, education and religious needs but, more often, workers are encouraged to subordinate their private life for their work life (Talwar 2003)

No manager can be expected to meet every employee’s needs all of the time, but when personal needs go unmet, frustration and tension rise. When an employee is scheduled to work during a time he has stated he is unavailable he can attempt to resolve the issues with his co-workers. At The Supermarket, we were allowed to switch shifts if both parties agreed – the change had to be signed by the two employees and a manager in order for it to become official. When there is no one available to swap shifts with, the employee is left with no option other than missing one of the two scheduled events. Missing work could compromise one’s job but often the other scheduled event was less “flexible” – a test in an important class, taking care of one’s child or family member. Employees were not faulted for missing work due to illness (to an extent) and, properly handled, one could be “sick” and unable to make it into work. Managers were not allowed to ask questions – they were required to take an

employee at her word. This strategy worked only when used sparingly and too many missed work days, regardless of reason, hinted at malingering.

Furthermore, if this was occurring during the trial period, an employee risked being fired with absolutely no explanation and with no recourse.

The following passages might inspire some to question why employees did not quit the jobs they found so dissatisfying to pursue something more gratifying. I refer back to the discussion on hiring in Chapter Four as a reminder of how much time, energy and personal financing the process requires. And there is no reason why a different retail job would be better than this one. Questioning why millions of workers remain in retail jobs obscures the real issue of creating a better understanding of what actually occurs on the shop floor. As Newman (1999) observes in her comprehensive study of fast food workers in Harlem during the 1990s, there is a belief in the dignity of work, any work.

Supermarket workers completed their duties as the means to the end (of getting a paycheck) and because the sense of accomplishment that comes from doing something with yourself is a powerful motivator. West and Fenstermaker (1995) argue that economic fortune or lack of it is often conflated with individual attributes such as success or laziness, respectively, yet we need to extricate this false ascription of value from the individual.

That so many of my co-workers had some post-high school education suggests that even with potential alternatives, they were pursuing jobs at The Supermarket on their own impetus. In theory, the flexibly schedule could be adapted to fit a college schedule and although the wage was low in absolute terms, it was relatively higher than other possible options available. The wages



paid to new employees were unanimously seen as low although not always viewed as inappropriate. Many employees accepted the low wages as a “natural” part of the job, commenting “that’s just the way it is.”

In the past 20 years, U.S. workers have experienced a steady decline in pay, benefits and working conditions as business has forcefully advanced its own interests and exerted its own influence (Schor 1992; Tilly 2004). Supermarket wages have fallen from a high in the 1970s (Hughes 1999) and like the fast food workers in Newman’s (1999) study, many supermarket employees where I worked were living paycheck to paycheck. Supermarket jobs may be assumed to be a step or two above fast-food jobs in terms of prestige but that does not guarantee that the employees are living a more stable financial life. I often watched employees, cashiers mostly, have their hours cut unexpectedly and struggle to pay rent and bills, and attempt to feed themselves from the free samples given away in the store and product samples left in the break room. The prices at The Supermarket were higher than the supermarkets further from the city center and although people ate what was being sold when they had no other choice, they were not invested in the types of products being sold even although they were the backbone of the selling process. How to eat on a budget was lived everyday for most employees and some employees brought food from home rather than purchase prepared foods.

But then another employee warms up [canned spaghetti] and other employees always want bites. Nearing the end of the pay period, many of them have no money for food and eat what others share with them. It is incredibly sweet that they take care of each other this way, but shocking that they are coming to work with no food and trying to subsist off of free samples and overripe produce.

The excerpt below is record of the first time I called in sick. I did have a bad cold and my co-workers the night before knew I wasn't feeling well but I was very nervous about asserting my own needs over those of the corporation. What is of particular note is that I weigh my health against my income. It is only because I was not trying to support myself solely on my wages that I am able to conclude that I can "afford" to take the day off.

I just "called out" [ . . . and it] was a bit nerve wracking on the phone. I am sick. I don't feel well. I don't want to go to work. I can afford to take the day off. I think it is the best solution. But I still got really nervous when I called and now I am a bit giddy from the strange rush I got for taking control of my destiny. I am a slave to authority and have a difficult time standing up for myself sometimes. I also don't like to disappoint people and I like to help out, so knowing that I put co-workers at a disadvantage is a bit of a bummer.

Even sick I felt personally responsible for missing work. Interestingly, the responsibility is not to The Supermarket itself, but rather the people that I worked *with*. The corporation disappears slightly as the lived experience of bureaucracy becomes focused much more on social interaction than corporation dictation. It is precisely this component of work that makes the low-wage labor sector so insidious. The corporation didn't care that I was sick – I was not offered a paid day off, chicken soup, an extra break while I was working. But when I did stay home to repair my "self," my primary thoughts were of the guilt I experienced by "making" my team members work harder while I was out. The internalization inherent in the process of "doing work" is evidenced in this example. Although not at work, I was still "doing work" through by privileging my interpretation and evaluation of my actions through the lens of my co-workers rather than my peers.

This feeling of ownership over the experience of working a corporate job further reveals the retailer as an authority figure. Although employees did not actively voice their support for the subjugation of their personal needs, consent was expressed through feelings of responsibility for the impact our actions had on others. We became agents of the corporation working towards the ultimate goal of its smooth running. That feeling of responsibility did not earn a raise for a co-worker, it did not get someone their desired schedule, and it kept me going to work and the corporation running with a full staff.

These examples of very physical problems illustrate the internalization of “doing work.” I was responsible, and it was made explicitly clear, for placing my physical body in the appropriate place at the appropriate time. Both excerpts show something different, however. Each suggests that I was more worried about the intangible – the sense of being in control of my being, above, and below, the confidence to assert my own needs over the need for me (or my presence).

Now I am dealing with a bit of a conundrum. I was asked to switch to a later shift and I hesitated because I wanted to meet up with some friends I haven’t seen in a long time. But I wonder if I should just do it. The “guilt” of saying no is weighing on me, and I am typically the type of person that will do what is asked of me. I am surprised I said no, although I did wait until my boss left so I could just say no to a different (lower level) manager.

Though it is possible that I would have experienced guilt whether I said yes or no, the striking difference is the direction of emotion. By saying no to my colleague I am, effectively, denying “doing work,” and instead choosing to “do friendship” by keeping my plans with my friends.

The excerpt below provides another illustration of the impact that the fulfilling of corporate needs can have on personal lives.

One employee was in a relationship with someone in another department. Their schedules were opposite and it had been weeks since they had been able to spend time together – he was asleep by the time she came home from work and gone in the morning when she woke up. Although she discussed the problem with our boss, the scheduling needs of the department always trump the needs of the employees. When you are managing groups of tens and hundreds of people, each person's schedule cannot be accommodated.

The demand that employees become flexible assets reiterates the role of the retailer as a legitimate authority figure and is a significant component of “doing work.” By setting the rules and boundaries of the structure of work, retailers assert themselves as the munificent guardian of the labor force as workers as well as earners. These bureaucratic “rules,” in theory, govern all employees equally and the desire to meet the expectations becomes internalized as a positive attribute or a shortcoming. The low, barely subsistence, wages furthered the strong positioning of the retailer by “encouraging” employees to construct their social lives (anything occurring outside of the store) as flexible, meeting the demands of the retailer and ensuring a paycheck.

The process seemed so internalized it appeared as if employees were consenting to participating as the subordinates in the exchange of wage for labor. Fierce competition for each position, the length of time it took to be hired, and a bad job market all contributed to the consenting capitulation of the employees. The interaction and social process of low-wage work squarely benefits not only the specific retailer but also the American capitalist system in

general. Employees are socialized to privilege the needs of the retailer over their own basic human reproduction.

Williams (2006) argues that consumption patterns exacerbate social inequality and injustice. The food retailing industry certainly does as well, by constructing a large workforce of employees with little control over the sale of their own labor. The most significant aspect, however, is that the workers have come to expect nothing more and are often surprised when they encounter the exception. Co-workers often expressed a relative satisfaction with their jobs at The Supermarket; regardless of the absolute difficulties the positions were considered better than previous jobs. The allure of even better jobs was incited when the story of a woman who left the store, maybe got fired, and then got a job icing cupcakes circulated for days. She was making \$15 an hour AND she was able to sit down. The details may have been exaggerated but the story became a folktale that circulated to make moral points about work life. The folklore of better, and worse, jobs acted as a means to both internalize contemporary capitalism and externalize discontent with one's personal position within.

### ***Breaks***

Businesses are required by law to provide a certain number of breaks per shift but they are not required to pay the employee for her time. When I was scheduled for a typical 8.5 hour shift I was given two fifteen minute paid breaks (one at the beginning, one at the end) and a thirty minute unpaid lunch break.

Thirty minutes for lunch, in the middle of a hectic day, flies by. I never had enough time to catch my breath, heat up my food, relax for a minute and eat at a reasonable pace. I always found myself rushing to finish my meal and eating as I walked back to my department. Going to the bathroom had to wait until I was back on the floor and could take a quick (unofficial) break.

The time required to reproduce oneself (eat, use the bathroom, rest) was *supposed* to occur during the unpaid lunch break, an outsourcing of worker reproduction to the worker herself. Employees often used the excuse of a bathroom break, however, as a way of grasping for autonomy in an otherwise subservient position. The employees, herself included, in Talwar's study (2003) of fast-food workers were instructed to clock out during shifts when the customer traffic slowed. Although they were required to remain physically present, in uniform, at the job site, they were not being paid for their labor. The slow work times were seen as extrinsic to the needs of the corporation, rather than an inherent component of the workday.

The precept that a person can work for hours without a break to take a deep breath, to refocus for 30 seconds is an inherent part of the retail work environment. The Supermarket did not, technically, restrict employees' needs to use the toilet. It did, however, keep track of the breaks and front-end cashiers were given approximately three minutes – logged with a timer by the manager of the department. The shame of being caught by the objective timer was intended to keep employees "honest" during the workday, although many cashiers, once cut loose from the register, roamed the store using a variety of strategies to delay returning to their register.

Taking a bathroom break is a strategy employed to contest these enforced behavioral codes. Though my department did not time our bathroom breaks, I found myself taking them in order to sit down for a minute or two and to escape from the probing public eye. Sitting on a toilet was a desperate attempt to rest my body. Not only was I sneaking to the bathroom to rest my body, but also to rest my mind. The intercom system in the nearest bathroom was broken so there was no music, affording a rare sense of calm and quiet in an otherwise overstimulating environment. The background music was chosen by the opening manager from a selection of cds provided by the store manager<sup>19</sup> and varied in genre, tempo and style: current hits, upbeat “world” music, and “oldies” were all heard and song lists repeated throughout the day. The broken intercom also afforded a freedom from pages requiring extra help at the cash register or with customer service – if you could not hear the page, you could not know you were not answering the page. A concrete shop filled with glass, metal, plastic and paper can be overwhelming and the hush of the bathroom provided a reprieve from the aural stimulation of the shop floor.

It became necessary for my own sanity to be able to have those moments of silence and to be able to disengage, but the need to be alone was felt not only by me. I found little “private” nooks to spend the occasional breaks when I just needed to be alone and was always shocked to discover another co-worker in my “special” spaces. Interactive service work demands that workers are physically present with the customers and movement from the crowded “public” space of the shop floor to a seemingly “private” space where one could be alone was often sought in order to recoup from “doing customer

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<sup>19</sup> Or so the gossip suggested. Although music choice was discussed amongst the floor workers, it was always conjecture rather than factual or based on evidence.

service work.” Newman (1999), while writing about the difficulties of living in a small apartment that lacks the necessary space to cool down after an argument, inadvertently points to one of the biggest distinctions of interactive service work. This “cool down space” is conspicuously missing from the shop floor in a retail environment. I was able to use the bathroom as a place to revitalize my spirit and energy, but, as I have noted, this was the exception not the norm.

The example of using the bathroom as a zone of respite illustrates the complexity of the relationship between the physical and mental experience of interactive service work. Working in the showcase of the cash register with thousands of strangers passing you by, some stopping to engage in a momentary interaction (though often incredibly limited and insulting) most just passing by as if you were an inanimate part of the cash register itself, is the modern day panopticon.

Inevitably, a customer would stop me on my way to or from a break. Similar to the aversion of the customer gaze by the employees in Williams’ (2006) study of retail work in toy stores, employees at The Supermarket learned to manage their own bodies and avert eye contact and/or walk briskly in order to deflect customer interruptions.

One of the most frustrating aspects of the job was that other people were constantly telling me about my own social reality. I might have known that I was in the middle of a task, but because I did not appear to the customer to be doing something tangible, they became very frustrated and irritated that I was exerting my own dominance over the shopping interaction that they were instigating. This social interaction between customer and employee reinforces the presumed social value



of each actor – the customer demanding attention on her schedule and the employee put in a position of having to defend her own ability to be an actor in the interaction.

The job, with the assumptions that it is low-skill, carries with it the assumption that it is easy. By overlooking the complexities of interactive retail work we risk denying basic human comforts to a large percentage of the workforce. As this chapter illustrates, “doing work” is not contained to the walls of The Supermarket: expectations, ideologies, and actions are shaped by the work environment and continue to exert influence after employees clock out.

Managing the nourishment of one’s body and learning to eat on demand required a reorganization of personal needs and a prioritization of those of the retailer. Training my body to eat on demand proved difficult and I was often hungry while working and not hungry on break so I often kept food in my apron and learned strategies for eating “on the clock” from my co-workers. When caught by a customer, a quick “so sorry” often dissipated the situation.

### ***Whose time is it?***

The owner of time is, front and center, the corporation. By setting the boundaries of the workday and exerting control over both the expectations and expressions of that time, retailers become the defining force of the reality of work. The corporation presents itself as the buddy (work *with* us!) or the caretaker (we offer health insurance!) but “it” was feared by employees.

The same rules and regulations that promoted the blind authority of bureaucracy were executed unflinchingly when broken. As the passage below

indicates, I was so worried about being late to work that I spent my own money taking a taxi to work – the fear of missing a few minutes of work encouraged me to “miss” more than two hours of pay to cover the expense of a taxi ride.

I was late to work yesterday!!! I just looked at the schedule wrong and thought I was working 11:30-7 instead of 11-7:30. What I thought doesn't make any sense, but that is how mistakes are made. I was quite worried about getting written up, so I decided to take a taxi to work. I made it within the grace period, but it cost me \$20. It was like getting docked 2 hours of work for being 10 minutes late!!! Not sure what would have happened if I got written up.

I did not get fired for this transgression and it is clear that it seriously frightened me. The responsibility for “doing work,” in this case on getting to work, is squarely on the employee's shoulders. I was almost late one other time and the notes below illustrate not just my anxiety about the situation but they hint at the build-up that occurred on the shop floor before I arrived, on time.

I had to call in that I was going to be late because of [public transportation] issues. I was really tired from closing the night before, but the adrenalin of having to rush woke me up a bit. I walked to a different stop as I called the store to let my supervisor know what was happening. I have noticed that it gets marked on the schedule as a note to others, but am not sure if it is analyzed and/or supervised in any other way.

At one mandatory store meeting with all staff, the 400+ employees were instructed to bring in letters from the transportation authorities if their tardiness was due to a public transportation issue such as a late bus or stopped subway car. Many employees chose to take the demerit of being late rather than deal

with asking the station manager to write you a letter, on official letterhead, attesting to being delayed. The simultaneous treatment like an adult who can handle his own life and the child being surveyed for honesty and accuracy can be a confounding experience. It is the time and responsibility of excusing oneself that is the more interesting point and what is easier for the corporation to demand also serves as a way of weeding out potentially inflexible employees. If you are uncomfortable donating your time and energy to obtain an official letter excusing your tardiness, then you must either choose to give yourself more time to get to work thus exhibiting a greater sense of loyalty, or you are late, receive demerits and you are eventually fired for being unruly.

“Doing work” does not occur only on the shop floor and, like the expectation that employees will contribute their own time for lunch breaks, is premised on an ideology of work that privileges the corporation over the individual. Most workers spend time traveling to their workplace, this is nothing exceptional to the food retailing industry. What is particularly interesting is the amount of time it actually takes to get through the front door and prepared to clock in – and the location of the time clock maximized the usage of the employees’ donated time. Making it through the crowd of shoppers, into the back and through the narrow passageway, putting my things in a locker, hanging up my jacket, bumping (literally) into co-workers required an expenditure of my own time. In the negotiation of whose time is whose, the employee will usually lose. Once officially on the clock, the employee is under the supervision and responsibility of the employer and begin receiving wages in exchange for their labor.

Employees were required to enter through the main doors of the store when they arrived at work, and to leave through the same doors after their shift in order to be caught on the store's security camera to "prove" they were at work and allow the security guard to check their personal belongings. Status as a supermarket employee began as soon as workers entered the store.

Surveillance also began at this point as one's physical presence was recorded by the video camera and logged into the system when clocking in with a personal identification number.

The centrality of work in the lives of modern capitalist workers is not specific to the food retailing industry. Technological advances now allow workers to be contacted at any time in almost any place – there are plenty of stories of high-powered executives taking phone calls in bed, on the beach, while driving. There is an obvious wage discrepancy between an entry-level supermarket clerk and an upper-level manager but more striking is the similarity of the underlying expectations and assumptions about work, workers and time.

### ***Doing gender***

Not all workers' bodies were treated equally and "doing gender" created a complex, hierarchical network of "doing work." Assumptions about appropriate types of work, task complexity, and the legitimacy of criticisms varied by gender and women and the work they did was often devalued on the supermarket shop floor. Just as the worker with the larger body had a more difficult time working in the register space, gendered bodies personified an implicit set of expectations about how men and women do work in a supermarket. At times, workers were treated differently depending on their

gender. Although my department was only half female, it was assumed by workers in other departments that the jobs were easier therefore women's work. I was never able to establish why our department got this reputation as many of the job requirements were the same throughout the store. Jobs at the meat counter, for example, were considered to be more appropriate for men as butchering and handling raw meat was considered to be strenuous physical labor.<sup>20</sup> This is absolutely counter to the reality of the store, however, as unpacking boxes of canned tomatoes, cases of heavy shampoo, or large sacks of coffee beans required the same physical strength and exertion.

Almost all of the men [in my department] are hesitant to ring on the cash register, especially Steve who avoids it as much as possible and really hates it. But I think it is because he finds it difficult. I heard him tell a customer that the process for returns was really insane and difficult and tedious [ . . . and he] is totally inept on the cash registers. They all think that somehow we are better at the cash register and it has something to do with being a woman.

The gender divide expressed itself most clearly when dealing with products within the store. Although none were overtly labeled as too masculine for the female employees to deal with, almost all of the male employees avoiding the section devoted to body care. Although I think I can safely assume that they all showered, using soap and maybe even shampoo, and occasionally lotion for dry skin, they would inevitably pass off any customer looking to purchase one of these items to a female staff member. We were all required to attend various trainings and most were for products that I would not use myself, but I approached it as a learning process and a skill building exercise.

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<sup>20</sup> As Sobal (2005) suggests, meat is the masculine and the act of butchering could be considered to be epitome of "doing meat."

The men won't even help customers find the baby products [ . . . ]  
Feigning ignorance or blatantly announcing their ineptitude with "those types of items," I watched my male counterparts expose their gendered stereotypes and slight sexist discrimination. You need help with those products, let me get a woman for you. Never mind that she is 18 and just started yesterday, I am sure she will be able to help you better than me and all I have not learned in the five years I have been working here.

The difference in "doing work" between men and women further contradicts the premise that rationalized jobs are low-skill jobs performed by interchangeable workers. Ingrained in "doing work" were the expectations of how men and women should appropriately should act, move and interact. The skill of identifying and performing work was not written in the employee handbook. Despite many women bringing up the gender inequality in a store meeting, it was disregarded by both management and the men as trivial and frivolous.

### ***Conclusions***

Studies of interactive service workers in the retail sector have focused on fast food workers and, in comparison, The Supermarket workers had a greater freedom of movement due, in part, to the size of the store itself (Newman 1999; Talwar 2003). The constant arousal and stimulation of the sales floor is dangerously distracting and the constant barrage of sounds and human interaction leaves little time for day-dreaming or relaxation, both necessary to maintain a semblance of personal comfort and sanity (see Schor 1992 for a discussion of work and the decline of leisure). Furthermore, both are necessary in order to process complex social issues and engage critically with the social world (see Langer 1989). When I got off of work I needed to spend

time decompressing from the stress of the day yet I still had to manage the household labor, the “second shift” (Hochschild [1988] 2003b) of feeding myself, bathing, and sleeping, and housekeeping. I had very little time left to engage with others and my unpredictable hours, late nights and exhaustion made my friendships outside of the store difficult to maintain.

Most, if not all jobs, require employees to use unpaid time to prepare themselves for work and to reproduce themselves after, but the impact of irregular schedules, long hours and job insecurity reaches far outside The Supermarket walls. In a comprehensive overview of work and food choice, Devine et al. (2009) found a positive relationship between irregular schedules and consumption of prepared/away from home meals. The majority of their respondents were, self-reportedly, overweight or obese and the majority of their meals came from outside of the home. Many employed mothers ate their meals in their cars. Few employees at The Supermarket had cars, many had children, and all were job insecure and earning less than a living wage.

The current social contract between the employer and the laborers does not provide social services in exchange for workers’ time, energy and emotion and health insurance, benefits packages, and paid sick days have become obsolete in most industries. The Supermarket prided themselves on providing more social services than the typical retailer and used this distinction to promote a sense of benevolence. Compared to other supermarkets in the area they offered something unique and this did not go unnoticed by employees, yet what was overlooked was the relatively recent loss of these services as integral components of “doing work.”

The Supermarket's role as the all-encompassing employer, and the polite suggestion that the employee "join" them in their distribution efforts, further integrate them as all-knowing authority figures. The process of consenting to work for a retailer, to accept the position as a natural configuration of modern capitalism, subverts the individual's ability to exert an opinion contrary to the stated goals of the corporation. As the corporation's goal become internalized as the natural intention of the process of distribution, the food retailers gain even further traction as legitimate authority figures appropriately, accurately, and positively defining our social, economic and cultural realities.



## **CHAPTER SIX:**

### **MANAGING THE MIND – DOING MENTAL WORK**

Retail work requires an immense amount of mental dexterity to efficiently learn the rules, official and unofficial, of a large corporate bureaucracy and the skills required to combat a relentless feeling of isolation and boredom. Techniques employees used to manage their bodies while engaged in interactive service work have been discussed previously and this section deals more specifically with mechanisms engaged when *learning* to “do” work. This chapter will detail the training process, as a means, to contradict the popular assumption that low-skill work can be done by any, and every, worker. The evidence suggests the contrary – “doing supermarket work” requires a mastery of both corporate and social rules and regulations as well as the management of monotonous work in order to not succumb to the pressure of boredom.

The specialized skill of knowing how to learn is not one that all workers at The Supermarket had honed, yet the assumption of the interchangeable workforce is based on the equitable learning capability of all workers. The Supermarket provided training and by proffering the correct way to do this type of specialized work the retailer asserted itself as the producer/creator of information. It then shifted the responsibility for knowing this information to the employee and failure to accurately and appropriately learn was presented as an individual shortcoming rather than a flawed system of distribution (of knowledge).

Official and unofficial rules governed The Supermarket shop floor and this chapter will describe the process of learning to manage the self in order to assimilate to the dominant workplace milieu. This chapter will also address the tedium of monotonous retail work, one of the most challenging aspects of being on the shop floor, and the numerous coping strategies workers developed to withstand the pressures of boredom. The larger impact of employee boredom in the retail sector reaches far outside of the supermarket walls. When workers are bored at work, they are interested in less extracurricular stimuli rather than more.

### ***Learning on the supermarket shop floor***

After successfully negotiating the multi-staged hiring process and being offered a job, employees were required to attend an official orientation session held at The Supermarket. Learning to do work began at orientation and required the mental capacity to remember and organize a multitude of tasks in a specific and particular order: including how to clock in and out; memorizing and using an employee number, cashiering number, and locker combination; the time to arrive at work and when one could leave; and obtaining and completing the appropriate forms for schedule requests, benefit enrollment and payroll. Employees were also given handbooks that detailed many of the rules and regulations discussed in the previous chapter. A signature card provided The Supermarket proof that you had received the manual and the training – whether it had been understood and comprehended was not questioned. The official training manual contained the rules of the corporation and each store then had its own requirements that were not published in such a sanctified manner – there is no record of much of this unofficial training,

what I am referring to as the socialization process required to become a “good employee,” one who has learned to manage her body, self and others on the supermarket shop floor.

The job training process continued when I arrived, a few days after orientation, for my first shift, as evidenced in the excerpt from the field notes below:

I am told that I will be following Jenny around, learning from her and helping her with her tasks for the day. [ . . . ] We began the day by checking in orders, a long, multi-stage process that the employee is entirely in charge of. From making sure we got everything in the order, to putting the correct price sticker on the item, to putting the item on the correct shelf. We “faced” products for the rest of our day, which means we pull all the items to the front of the shelf and make sure they are organized and there are at least three of each product on the shelf. [ . . . ] Everyone was very helpful and has offered to assist me as I figure things out.

The co-worker assigned to train me had no particular expertise in how to properly train a new employee. She was, however, competent at her job and able to communicate the component pieces. She both knew the expectations of the position and how to maneuver throughout the day; the explicit and implicit mandates of the retail clerk. Unlike the official training processes detailed in a case study of a leading supermarket firm (Hughes 1999), employees at The Supermarket did not receive a certificate of accomplishment or have to meet a certain number of training hours to be a shop floor clerk. Although impossible for a new employee to learn everything in one day, donning a company apron on the shop floor masked this ineffectuality and I had to quickly learn how to deflect difficult customer inquiries.

My prior knowledge of retail work, in general, and supermarket work, specifically, afforded me an advantage and I quickly learned how to do work on the shop floor. Years of studying supermarkets and natural groceries equipped me for learning about the products sold in the store and I recognized many brand names and knew, basically, what types of products they were. This knowledge is not required of employees and I found that many had no interest in the products being sold and no interest in learning more about them. As the newest employee in my group, I was a source of wonder. The biggest concern of my co-workers was whether I would become a threat to their own future and promotion within the company. I was able to quickly learn the location of many items within the department and this did not go unnoticed by my colleagues. I was, therefore, effectively socialized to not appear too eager.

The self must be managed with precision when working in a group. I learned, quickly and somewhat subconsciously, how to manage my own learning process in order to not cause tension with my co-workers. I never denied knowing something but I learned how to be a good employee by modeling my behavior after my co-workers. I followed their lead and learned when and how to ask questions and when and how to follow what were presented as unwavering rules. It was my intention to gain experience as an entry level clerk and I made the amendment to my behavior as a way of socializing myself into the group. I did not desire to upset my co-workers and found myself wanting to please them as much as my superiors (the role of friendships will be discussed in Chapter Seven). One of my co-workers had a vastly different experience during the training process and a much more contested socialization process:

[Lana] is not trusted with helping customers, putting things out correctly, or much of anything. If someone took the time to help her learn, I think she could learn it, but the attitude is that you need to teach yourself how to do things. For someone with very little experience with formal education (she didn't graduate from high school) that skill of "how to learn" has not been learned itself.

This example reiterates the importance of knowing how to learn, both to fit in and the substantive knowledge about products and procedures. The Supermarket was willing to train workers but not able to train them how to be trained. The focus on the details and the steps of each process obscures larger issues in education and literacy but ultimately benefits the retailer by maintaining a labor market that is socialized to be subservient. The ultimate authority is expressed by constructing a situation where the other party has no ability to express individualism. In this case The Supermarket used Lana's inability to learn how to learn, essentially her ignorance (a socially constructed lack of information) to its own benefit.

A highly rationalized job such as supermarket retail work can theoretically train interchangeable workers for each position because the job requirements are parsed into the precise details one must accomplish. This ideology also acts as a constraint on workers by discouraging them from learning beyond the stated goals. By constructing these boundaries around the production of knowledge, corporations are able to create a very particular type of workforce – one that will perform up to expectations but not beyond the appropriate position.

There was a variety of ability, and inability, amongst the workers – some feigned and some real. The excerpts below present an overview of one of the

most fundamental and tedious tasks of a supermarket clerk, stocking the shelves. This complex, multi-stage process is the most blatant example that contradicts the assumption of low-wage retail work as also low-skill. Although the results of improper positioning never resulted in physical harm or death, the repetitive misplacement of goods frustrated customers and employees alike, adding tension to already contentious social interactions.

One of the main tasks of a supermarket clerk is to put goods out for sale. The basic steps are to check in an order, unpack a box, price the items, and place them on the shelf. The order of the steps is fairly rigid, but this logical procedure should not be mistaken as a low-skill interaction. First, checking in an order of multiple boxes of items requires an attention to detail and basic literacy. Product codes on the box or the individual items must be match to a long list of numbers on an invoice. Pricing the items seems the most obvious step of the process there is plenty of room for error here as well. The price gun must be set to print the correct price and this is where errors most often occur. The price of an item can be found on a shelf tag, a complex series of numbers and letters that signify everything from manufacturer to price per ounce (or other unit of measure). Accurately reading a shelf-tag is the most difficult aspect of the stocking process and where the most errors occur. Many employees were unable, or unwilling, to match the universal product code (UPC) tag on the product itself to the UPC number on the shelf-tag and this oversight often resulted in misplaced and/or mis-priced items. This simple mistake became an enormous hassle when customers were irritated by the price discrepancy and a manager had to be called to both resolve the tension

and authorize the void. The employee noticing the error would then become responsible for examining all other items to ensure they were priced correctly.

Although the task may appear straightforward, it is not low-skill; rather, it is devalued. Low-skill may be used interchangeably with basic-skills but even then it creates an oversight and portrays an unrealistic portrait of the retail workforce. Leidner (1993) notes that routinization did not make the tasks easier and that although they may seem very simple and straightforward in their component parts, calling them low-skill devalues the work that employees are doing.

Some employees had the ability to stock the shelves accurately but were unwilling to complete the task. This further illustrates the skill required to be successful within the position. Retail work requires not only the literacy to be able to read product codes but also the ability to withstand repetitive precision work. Assuming that every person can work in this manner insults those who are able to do the work well and contradicts the evidence that only a minority of employees were able to successfully complete assigned tasks. It takes an immense amount of physical stamina to work an 8 hour shift (as discussed in Chapter Five) and putting items on a shelf, in the correct spot requires the employee to both know how to perform the task and feel a sense of responsibility that inspires her to complete the task. What I took for granted as an obvious connection was contested, in practice, by most of the employees. Their lack of compliance with this matching game illustrates the difficulty of rationalizing human behavior despite efforts to do so.

I have found myself getting irritated by my co-workers, particularly because recently, a lot of items have been mis-marked. This is irritating for me because when an item rings up wrong (and I am on the register a lot), the customer gets irritated and points it out and I have to do a void and ring it up at the marked price. It isn't difficult, but I have to call a manager and it is a pain and it holds up the line and it is just an unnecessary frustration. And it happens ALL the time.

Products were often misplaced because of laziness or lack of caring otherwise, but I also observed products being misplaced unintentionally.<sup>21</sup> Occasionally, the person stocking the shelves did not realize that they were misplacing items. It is this unintentional oversight that reflects a larger failure in the critical thinking of American workers.

The retailer, recognizing the need for not only information but also training on how to use that information, provided monthly training sessions to introduce employees to new products and educate them about customer service performance. My first experience with the training is described below:

Each month we are required to listen to a training session and take a quiz to see how much we learned. I was taken into the manager's office and, in typical fashion, Vivian had barely begun explaining how to do it before just reaching across me and hitting the buttons herself. She told me I could take notes. I was a bit nervous about the test (didn't want to compound the customer complaint).

Attitudes toward trainings varied widely. I got nine out of ten questions correct on the training test and I remember feeling a sense of pride at my accomplishment. I had been palpably nervous going into the exam and felt the pressure to succeed so that my employment would not be terminated (the first

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<sup>21</sup> Customers occasionally misplaced individual items but this section is dealing with the systematic mis-placement of the entire available stock of a particular item.



“training” occurred during the trial period when my employment could be terminated at will). A few months later I was chatting with a much younger employee and she confided that she never even listened to the training and just answered randomly on the test. She is still with the company and when I saw her a year later reported that she was happy and thrilled to have been transferred to a different store (I did not ask her if she had begun listening to the trainings).

### ***The cash register***

One of the fundamental tasks of a supermarket clerk is operating the cash register and handling the sales transaction (point of purchase). I was a relatively smooth cash register operator and this had less to do with the highly programmed register than with a comfort with tendering money and a fondness for math. In fact, it was despite the cash register that I was able to perform the point of purchase operations skillfully.

Though I had one of the most accurate cashiering records (meaning there was neither too much nor too little money in my register at the end of a shift) I was not allowed to train other employees or institute a change in the program itself. My entrepreneurial spirit to teach my co-workers basic algebra was never allowed to near blossoming into a reality. Trainings, however inept and incomplete, were handled by an employee with the official label of “trainer.” As a clerk, it was incomprehensible that I would have an interest in this aspect of work and after astonishing a few co-workers with my ability to make change without looking at the register screen, I self-consciously developed techniques to appear less capable. I was not attempting to hide a skill, rather I was

attempting to fit in and perform the task, as not only assigned but also expected. By rewriting the script of making change, I drew attention to myself that was not always positive,<sup>22</sup> as described in the excerpt below:

There is no feedback on how I have been doing on the register. Have I lost credit card slips? Is my cash over, under, correct? No idea. And the system breeds stupidity because it doesn't keep the total on the screen and you have to bend down, and there is no way to see the screen still, and so you can't check yourself. Since there is no evidence of the total, you start to just grab the amount of change it shows you.

When I first worked with money in the mid-1980s I was taught to count change back to the customer by counting up (if someone owes \$5.65 and gives you a \$10, you start with the coins, one dime, one quarter bringing the total to \$6 and then four singles to make it \$10). And you would count the money back to the customers in the same way. Putting the change into their hands to make \$6 and then count the single bills to \$10. By counting, you double-check yourself. Did two bills stick together? Did I count them correctly? It also keeps the change from sliding out of the customer's hand and on the counter. The excerpt below documents the pride I took in doing my work as well as the lack of control and sense of personal responsibility employees have when the process of making change is outsourced to a computer.

I have to write about my perfect cashiering tills and how this is apparently something unusual. Customers remarked the other day that

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<sup>22</sup> See Chapter 5 in Burawoy 1979 for a similar discussion of workers being socialized to do less in order to maintain the group standards rather than privilege personal accomplishments. Management actively engaged, at The Supermarket and at Allied Corporation, in this behavior and employees' actions, therefore, should be assumed not to be oppositional, but rather normative. Schor (2000) notes the complexity of an independent rise in productivity – because employees cannot effectively manage their working hours based on accomplishment, they are socialized to do less work over a longer period of time in order to maximize wages. They are rewarded by management, therefore, by acquiescing to a lower standard of productivity.

I still managed to easily count back their change even although I typed in the wrong amount and that many cashiers couldn't do that. I got their point, this has happened many times to me as a customer, but it is just sad that people who are working cash registers aren't taught math and how to count money. Or they don't care to learn and just follow the prompts on the registers.

The following excerpt further illustrates the responsibility I felt towards not only doing my job well but also my (relatively new) skill of knowing how to manage myself within the system:

I might have ruined my perfect cashiering record. When I got change the other day, I put the 10s on top of the 20s and the 5s in the 10s spot. I worry that I gave a 10 or a 5 to a customer by mistake, instead of something else. I am usually really good about counting back the change, but I have no idea if I "saw" what I thought I had in my hand. Even if I gave away a 10, it will only take 2 days of perfect cashiering to make up for it (because I think you lose 5 points for being "on spot").

My fascination with counting money may be old-fashioned, but it also illustrates an engagement with not only the money but also the sales process itself. The cash register at the store quickly changed the display from Amount Owed to (amount of) Change. Even if you wanted to count back up the machine made it almost impossible. The employee has become completely dependent on the retailer for the basic mastery of the job. The skill of making change has been transferred from being configured by a person to being configured by a computer. Although the amount of change owed to the customer may become more accurately computed, I saw no evidence that it is more accurately transferred to the customer. Counting is counting and without knowing how to double-check yourself you might hand a stack of miscounted money to a customer.

The return process, on the other hand, was clumsy and fraught with tension. For the first several weeks of my employment I dreaded the words “I need to make a return” coming from a customer because of the confusion and animosity involved in process. The excerpt below highlights the multiplicity of emotions experienced when “doing” highly rationalized retail work:

I am still frustrated and confused by the returns process and the assistance I get from the supervisors and the “cashier trainer” do not help. Most of them just shove me out of the way and do the return themselves, as if I am going to be able to keep up with what they are doing as since they are standing in front of me, they expect I can see, when I can’t. One supervisor keeps telling me that I can look in the reference book that is kept up front. However, as I pointed out to her, the process is different than the process we use. She said, yes, it is different, but it will help you understand what to do. I have no idea how I am supposed to understand a 15 step process that is not the same, not even similar, to the one listed in the book.

Training, in this case removing me from the process altogether, did not encourage my learning. Once I did master the process of returns I realized how complicated the trainings had been for something incredibly short and simple. It really only involved hitting one extra button on the cash register. Previous versions of the register software had more complicated return processes and the written instructions were for that outdated system. It seemed that because there were written rules they must be followed even although only one step was the same. Each time I had to do a return (which required a manager to enter a code and so they always knew when I was processing a return and therefore repeatedly had the opportunity to remove me from the practice) the rule list was taken out and I was chastised into looking at it even although it provided no useful information. I did, eventually, learn how to accurately process a return and although the mastery of the task

provided some solace, the disconnect between the procedure manual and the actual operation continued to bother me.

I could, with my teaching experience, figure out a way to explain the return process and/or write up a little guide to how to do it. However, I resist because I think it would irritate everyone else there. The “trainer” gets so mad at customers that I find it difficult to stand with her. Her stress is contagious and I feel myself getting anxious. I don’t care as much if people are going to be rude to me, I feel like I can do my job as the cashier regardless of their attitude. It is a bonus when they are nice, but it hasn’t really upset me yet.

The excerpt above is of note for two reasons. First, my decision to not attempt change based on my hesitancy to upset my co-workers indicates the extreme role that being liked plays in retail, and, again, betrays the anonymity and assumptions interchangeable workers “doing” highly rationalized work.

Second, my comment about not caring and my ability to do my job without becoming aggravated was obviously the statement of someone new to the job. It was not many days later that my attitude shifted. Although I eventually mastered the art of the product return, many of my co-workers avoided returns despite years of experience and used a variety of techniques to relocate customers needing to make a return to a different register. Although a transference of responsibility to another worker, it was understood and accepted that it was easier to process the return alone than attempt to assist him through the process. When he could not evade the product-returning customer he would almost always allow a manager to conduct the entire transaction.

I enjoy working with money and unlike some of my co-workers, I did not find making change and processing returns to be stressful activities, once

mastered. Most of my odd jobs over the years have dealt with money and I came into the job with strong math skills. Although not necessarily a prerequisite of the position (I don't think it came up on the application or during the interview), it is certainly a skill that contributed greatly to my ability to be successful in my job. While I was rarely flustered by the exchange of funds at the cash register, many of my co-workers spent the majority of their shifts feeling nervous. The unclear, and actually misleading, rationalized steps regarding appropriate techniques further unsettled them and many expressed anxiety about working on the register and about their capabilities in general.

The exchange of funds for products is the ultimate component of the retail experience and the most fundamental of tasks that employees are required to perform. The Supermarket's lack of efficient and coherent training for this task indicates their disregard for the employee as well as further establishes them as the ultimate authority. The official materials presented did not adequately prepare employees to do cashiering work and the unofficial socialization amongst the workers kept alternative sources of knowledge suppressed. Ironically, The Supermarket has outsourced many responsibilities to the employees. Like the outsourcing of distribution work to the customers driving their groceries home from centralized stores, as discussed in Chapter Three), the corporate supermarket cuts its personnel expenses down to the extreme minimum and outsources much of the reproduction *of the worker to the worker* herself.

### ***Learning to “not do work”***

Employees used their control over the speed of their actions in order to exert influence over an otherwise subordinate position as an interactive retail sales clerk. Activities such as counting out a drawer or writing down a schedule request could be drawn out if one wanted to chat with the other cashiers or sped up if there was something more pressing to do in the stockroom (like nibble on free snacks provided by a vendor).

Employees were allowed a significant freedom of movement on The Supermarket shop floor (with the exception of the front-end cashiers) but learning how to properly negotiate this control required a learned dexterity. There was no official rule governing how many cashiers were required to be present at the cash registers in the department. The knowledge that a cashier could page for back up (additional cashier) if truly needed contributed to the flippancy with which employees decided whether to stay or go. I would often stay on the register to chat with co-workers I enjoyed talking to and flee quickly when faced with standing near the co-workers I did not enjoy. I soon learned how to make the waiting customers disappear, from my consciousness at least, so that I would not feel the self-imposed pressure to remain at the register to ring up their orders. I was never taught this evasion method, explicitly, but it was a habit gleaned directly from my co-workers' behavior.

There is a definite moment, marked in my field notes, when I relaxed into my position and the fear of being reprimanded or fired for an indiscretion dissipated. I allowed myself to stay on break fourteen and a half minutes and return just in time or to get something for a “customer” from a different section

of the store that allowed me to walk around and return eighteen minutes after leaving for break. An official training about customer service inadvertently introduced me to a very different aspect of learning how to do work – learning how to *not* do work.

Barbara and I went to the training together and then stayed after for about 15 minutes talking to Johnny about who knows what. Food, I think. But for him to let us stay out of our department was interesting. I have always rushed back up to the floor, but really, it is the time to “steal” to go to the bathroom, check your voice and text messages, go to your locker, etc. You couldn’t go buy something in the store, but since he had food for us again, we were pretty sated.

When I first began working I made the conscious decision to follow all rules and regulations to the best of my ability. This soon proved to be unwarranted, unnecessary and subtly discouraged by my co-workers, managers and customers. Many times the rules proved ridiculously tedious and only a tenuous means to an unknown end. A written rule, no matter how rationalized and specific, was always bent through expression.

The following excerpts illustrate my surprise seeing two managers flagrantly flaunt the rules. The first illustrates the flexibility inherent in self-governance; the second illustrates how the rationalized return process becomes fungible depending on context.

Today was an interesting day as I saw the flexibility of the rules through the behavior of the managers. One signed an “unsigned” credit card slip, rather than getting his cashiering tally docked 5 points.

Provided the rules by the corporation, but then left to our own devices for their performance, subverting the rules was a viable option at times. Knowing the



correct procedure and deciding to follow it were not always concurrent occurrences. Not following the rules actually requires an immense amount of skill as it demands an understanding of both the situation and a viable alternative. The manager saw me watching him but, correctly, concluded that I would not bring the matter to anyone's attention.

The other offered to refund the non-sale price of the item to a pretty lady instead of the sale price she paid (as stated on her receipt). She actually was the one who said that she would prefer to just get back what she paid and the manager was really sketchy about it. Not sure if it was a flirty thing, an "I don't give a shit thing" or an "I don't really want to bother fixing it" kinda thing. Regardless, it was strange to watch.

In this case, the perceived attractiveness of the customer influences the manager to offer her more money in return than what she paid. This manager was known for his attention to "the pretty ladies" and would go out of his way to provide better service for better looking customers. Although a seemingly benign example, the wavering of his attentiveness depending on the physical appearance of the customer actually hints at a much larger social discrimination. The high rationalized corporate supermarket is supposed to provide an equal shopping field for any customer who can afford to purchase the products for sale. In practice, those paying customers were treated very differently – some benefited from his attraction as others did not. His actions were replicated by my co-workers who subtly learned to vary their customer service skills by context; this will be discussed further in Chapter Seven.

I also learned how to negotiate the intersection of rules and context:

A big realization is that I would give pennies, change, whatever to someone who treated me nicely and was kind, but that I would use the "rules" to shame someone who was being a jerk. "Ohhhh, but then I will

get points deducted from my score and I will get in trouble.”. .when I really know that I can find change that someone else left. It is the tiniest shred of control over an otherwise subordinate position.

Unlike the examples of my managers’ behavior, not “giving” customers spare change did not break a manifest regulation. Experience on the register quickly taught me to prioritize the money in my (cash register) drawer over everything else – a very nice woman came in and really, really, really needed the item she was buying but was about fifty cents short. She promised me that she would bring it back later in the day but of course never returned. That amount of shortage does result in points being docked from your cashiering tally and could have caused a serious issue if my record had already been shaky. The instance was never mentioned to me and I assume that my heightened awareness to money tendering over the next few days “added” points back to my score to even things out. (Your score stayed at zero unless points were deducted for being either over or short; when your score became negative you then earned points for being on target, essentially enabling you to return to zero.)

I developed my own rules and regulations and used them at my whim to maximize my ability to do work. I often followed all rules even when I did not see their point or was irritated that I was doing the work that my co-workers easily dismissed such as putting the price stickers in the correct spot on the product and the newer products towards the back of the shelf. There are probably arbitrary boxes of cereal and packages of toilet paper that have been there since day one; getting lost in the madness of maintaining the work ethic of thousands of employees in a busy urban store. I can still distinctly recall

putting out hundreds of bottles of shampoo in front of the stock already on the shelves. I was working with another employee and our disregard for the appropriate method was both unspoken and mutual.

My irritation is palpable in the excerpt below and stems from both being left out of Leah and Barbara's clique and watching the rules being unabashedly flouted.

Leah and Barbara were supposed to be facing the store for closing but they do not do a single thing!! Michael (a manager) was in the office downstairs "working" and when he came up [before closing], nothing had been done. He asked them about it and they just shrugged him off. It seemed like obvious mutiny to me. He did seem annoyed that no facing had been done, but I wonder if he recognized that it was a power struggle between them and him. Ironically, Leah later received the outstanding employee award.

I developed a particular sense of responsibility towards the job, in total, and preferred for tasks to be completed in a thorough manner. Like Newman's (1999) participants in a study of fast-food workers, I took pride in my work and found my co-workers' attitude personally insulting – as I engaged with the idea of working together as a team, they were working against Michael and there was known tension between him and Barbara. I also knew that we would all be equally blamed for the status of the shelves if the opening manager made a note of it and I worried for Michael who is a kind man but an ineffective leader.

### ***Learning to fit in***

Learning to be a good employee officially entailed learning the basic rules and regulations of the company, but learning to feel comfortable in my position and fit in had just as steep of a learning curve and took a much larger emotional

toll on my well-being. Spending my first few weeks surrounded by thousands of people but essentially alone was alienating and my relaxation after a few weeks on the job is palpable in my field notes.

More and more store employees, in general, are recognizing me and I am feeling like much less of an outsider. The front-end group is so large, however, that I still feel like an outcast when I am the odd person out in the break room. I am definitely feeling more comfortable at my job and now I can recognize similar patterns from other new jobs. I get really tense and have a hard time relaxing at the beginning (wouldn't sneak food before) and now I am feeling more relaxed and like I can be comfortable going into the back to eat a handful of almonds that I have in my apron pocket (they are mine – I have never stolen food!). I also just go to the bathroom when I need to, go in the back when I need to sit down for a second, keep my non-water drink in the back, come back a minute or two late from break (instead of early), and the newest development, joke around with co-workers.

The initial weeks were exhausting as I learned not only about the products and store, but tried to learn hundreds of names, recognize faces, relax, fit in and stop worrying that I would be fired at any second for making some unknown, yet egregious, mistake. "Doing work" was exhausting as I transformed from a customer to a naïve employee to an experienced employee.

Hours spent in solitude seemed to pass more slowly and once I was accepted by my co-workers the time started to pass more quickly. Saying a quick "hello, how are you" broke up a monotonous hour spent facing as chatting for ten minutes while on a break broke up the work day by allowing me to exist as an individual for a few precious moments.

I feel confident in my ability to complete tasks, I have made at least decent work relationships with everyone, and I can find ways to make the time go by [ . . . ] Carrie was back at work and she said she had

missed me. I think the job is really hard for her to bear because of the social tension between her and some other people. But I am glad to work with her again and we are closing tonight together [ . . . ] I have people to say hello to and chat with for a minute, and I have places and ways to goof off. A sure sign that I have earned my status as a member of the group.

I wanted to be a part of the team, not as a researcher but as a human being involved in social interaction. The reminder that it was research did not lessen the sting of doing something wrong, the fear of being fired, or the satisfaction of receiving a complement. The socialization process to be a “good employee” is so complex and totalizing that I did not realize how invested I was in performing my job well until analyzing my field notes months later. The implicit reward for being successfully socialized into a supermarket shop floor employee was less a benefit than a negation of a penalty – by fitting in, the risk that I would be ostracized, transferred or fired seemed lessened.

### ***Managing boredom***

One of the toughest aspects of interactive service work is the overwhelming boredom that can occur when repetitive, non-imaginative work becomes overbearing. Boredom can be defined as, “an unpleasant, transient affective state in which the individual feels a pervasive lack of interest in and difficulty concentrating on the current activity” (Fisher 1993:396) and experienced because of both lack and overload of stimulation. The defining input is a qualitative level of engagement with the material – machine operators repeating the same movement can experience a similar boredom to a college student listening to a complex lecture on an irrelevant topic. A bored employee is, therefore, not necessarily a less intelligent or capable employee. Boredom does not correlate with ability and it has a greater impact than a momentary

feeling of discomfort. Interestingly, The Supermarket's usage of music on the shop floor may have been instigated by a desire to quell boredom (Korczyński 2007) but the overwhelming reaction to it was mind-numbing as we were subjected to the same soundtrack repeated multiple times each day.

Regardless of the employee reaction to the music, it may have had a beneficial affect on the behavior of the customers, as the space of the supermarket is highly manipulated to encourage sales (Patel 2009).

Dealing with the recurrent drone of retail work is another skill that supermarket employees must master. Managing boredom while correctly completing tasks was something not all employees were able to do.

Some people throw themselves into keeping busy by finding small tasks to do on the sales floor, rearranging shelves, dusting old product, getting the back cage cleaned out. But others just foment in their boredom and the basic tasks that need to be accomplished are left unfinished. No one goes to get more paper towels, although it is a very simple task. No one checks the tags underneath the products that have 56 varieties, although everyone knows they are a mess. No one cleans the register area, because cleaning is tedious. But then we all sit around and wonder why we are so bored.

Boredom is a significant component of "doing retail work" and the management of the self, when under-stimulated, becomes the development of a variety of techniques used to retain attention. When boredom invades the process of "doing work" it creates social dynamics with greater potential for negative lasting impacts. Repetition and boredom within the retail sector seem to be accepted as natural components of the job. But we should not allow this conclusion to obscure the impact that these basic components have on the larger social world. There were times, in order to deal with the everyday strain

of the job, that it was easier to dull my senses than be irritated. Surprisingly, my senses were not immediately heightened upon leaving the store – to the contrary, they remained dampened. The sting of bitter social interactions between the employees and the customers lasted well beyond the boundaries of the working day. I still cringe when I overhear unpleasant customer service interactions as it recalls the strain and stress of learning how to manage my own reaction to the negative reinforcement I received on a daily basis from the thousands of customers who came through the store.

Keeping busy, in any way possible became the ultimate goal because if something, anything, could occupy your mental energy the insults and rude treatment of the customers would not have as much room to resonate in your mind. Keeping busy became a game and not allowing the customers to interrupt you the one and only rule. Learning to “win” at this game took me several months of concerted effort and it was only after I felt like I had developed a successful technique that I considered my experience to be saturated.

A sense of boredom also impacted my expectations about how I should be treated as a worker. The passage below indicates a resignation to the performance of the employee even when it contradicts the larger performance of my life and being outside of the store. A self-perpetuated boredom became a coping mechanism for alleviating the disappointment and frustration that I felt otherwise. Even the wonder of the supermarket ceased to be fulfilling as I consented to “doing work” as a retail employee. In the battle for my attention,

the job often won, beating out my determination to write concise, observant field notes.

The retail aspect is hurting my brain. I got a screwed up schedule and just can't be bothered to have to deal with fixing it. And the ridiculous thing is that I have to fix it because I can't physically work the shifts. You just stand around all day with your brains shut off, because when it is on, you realize that you are nothing more than a retail peon and although you might feel like you might be a better employee than others, they can all be trained. I can't even look at the products on the shelves anymore. The thought of buying something, using something, eating something has begun to repulse me. What I never thought could happen has happened, I have begun to detest the grocery store.

"Shutting off" my brain was a learned coping mechanism employed to combat the extreme boredom of the job. Although boredom is not specific to retail work, the distinction is that bored retail workers, unlike bored assembly line workers, interact with the public. As already argued above, "doing work" is a social interaction, practice and process that involves not only the employees but also the retailer and the customers. When one component of this negotiation is operating with a self-enforced limited capacity for stimuli, we must question the entire experience in itself. The interaction that one bored worker has with one customer is multiplied by the millions when the process of a self-enforced minimization of cognizance becomes standard behavior of one of the largest groups of workers in the U.S. Every customer that engages with a retail store encounters at least one employee, a cashier, if they are making a purchase. Although many employees are able to stay engaged with the social world of retail, most were observed to limit the amount of attention they were willing to provide to other employees, management and customers.



Often, the highly rationalized workplace reinforced situations that maximized the potential for employee boredom:

The most straining mental task is learning how to deal with boredom. Tasks often required the labor of only one employee and did not foster socializing. Left alone putting price stickers on products for four hours, one's mind starts to wander. Repeating these tasks daily, one's mind starts to shut off. Rather than think through all of the complex issues I was dealing with, I found myself unable to think at all. As soon as I got lost in a good thought I was inevitably interrupted by a customer wanting to use the bathroom or the sound of a glass bottle shattering on the floor spilling its contents everywhere.

My field notes indicate a fluctuation in my perception of the job based on, among other things, the other employees working the same/overlapping shifts. The proximity of others, Fisher (1993) argues, can alleviate the feelings of boredom and employees used both friendships and gossip as a means towards that end.

I hate work with a new (lack of) passion these days. Just dreading going, don't really enjoy being there, and ache to leave and not return. But then some days are better than others. Saturday was really painful, but Sunday passed pleasantly enough. I suppose it has to do with who else is working. But it is also tied to how many random customers like to point out [some] insulting thing. It directly coincides with customers feeling like they can tell us how to do our jobs. One customer told me that they should pay me more – it was such a nice treat to get a compliment!

My initial enthusiasm for the job and over-attention to every component part of it faded after a few months and my field notes are full of complaints, detailed below. My co-workers were equally bored but had developed better strategies for handling their emotions. I knew that I would not be able to leave the field until I, too, learned how to cope with the pressures of interactive service work.

I hate my job. It is humiliating and entirely boring. I can get up and go to work, I can pass the day while I am there, and I can leave and get ready to do it all again, but two days off in a row have made me realize how debasing it is. I actually had some thoughts for the first time in at least a few weeks.

I hate facing. I pretty much hate my job. If I were to really be pursuing a career at The Supermarket, I would try to get off the sales floor as quickly as possible.

Right now I hate my job. I didn't even work today, but the thought of having to go to work, to stand around, to put crap on the shelves, to get a shitty paycheck is frustrating. I asked to increase my shifts to 4 per week, but even working that much won't come close to paying the bills.

I am completely over my job. I am bored out of my mind and the thought of walking in and spending 8.5 hours of my precious time wandering around, putting shit on the shelves, and listening to co-workers complain about each other is enough to make me want to just skip out and never call them again [ . . . ] My legs are killing me, my feet are killing me, my back is killing me, my head is killing me.

Like my co-workers, I did eventually master the delicate skill of managing my boredom at work. As I dampened my awareness of my environment, I was able to maintain a baseline level of engagement while insulating myself from the demands of the job. On the one hand, it meant that I was not performing my job to fullest of my capabilities and that I followed my co-workers cues and did only the minimum that was expected of me. The exception to this was when doing more maximized my ability to move freely around the store, sit down in the manager's office or stay in the stockroom longer where I could sneak a snack and have a drink. The "reward" for staying more engaged seemed to only be increased irritation. Because managers rarely noticed when things were done incorrectly, they also failed to notice when things were done

correctly providing my department a relatively greater freedom of movement (physical and mental).

Langer's (1989) concepts of mindfulness and mindlessness help the interpretation of the boredom experienced by workers on the shop floor. Mindfulness and mindlessness are both states of mind; mindfulness can be understood as heightened attention and mindlessness as reduced attention. The active state of mindfulness is state of awareness and engagement in the construction of categories and distinctions yet it should not be assumed to be an effortful state. Mindfulness and mindlessness require similar amounts of exertion (i.e. they are not quantitatively different) yet they do vary, qualitatively, in type of processing and impact on the physical body. Mindlessness is a state of entrapment, Langer (1989) argues, and individuals become limited by a rigid system of categorization (created while they were in a mindful state) that has serious performance and health repercussions. The exertion of energy can be understood here as the maintenance of those categories and the compartmentalizing of experience into preconceived notions.

The workers on the shop floor experiencing the "boredom" of work fall prey to the state of mindlessness and the rigidity of expectation can be seen in the unfaltering alliance to the informal customer service scripts. When an individual is in a mindful state, Langer (1989) argues, she is adaptive, feels in control of her "self" (in the social psychological sense of both actions and thoughts), and is apt to expressing herself in more creative and "successful" ways. Mindlessness not only limits performance (she is not referring to job performance, but human excellence) but also negatively impacts health and

life expectancy. The crux of Langer's (1989) argument is not that we have all become passive absorbers of social life, but rather, the state of mindlessness reproduces dominant categories that were constructed during (someone else's) mindful moment. The danger, I am arguing, is that "doing work" has become dependent on the workers' state of mindlessness and the exertion necessary to transition back to a mindful state is often contested by retailers.

When retail workers disengage from the shop floor stimuli they are exiting the mindful state and entering the state of mindlessness; this transference directly benefits the retailer. The subordination expected of the workers during the hiring process and scheduling is furthered through the categorization of retail work as "just the way it is." The experience of workers on the shop floor is then effectively compartmentalized into that assumption of retail work rather than explicitly challenged, amended, contested and resisted. Employees are essentially rewarded for maintaining mindlessness (by not being fired) and more research is necessary to test the paradoxical hypothesis that there is a relationship between promotion and mindfulness.

It should also be noted that employees were never instructed on how to handle being disgruntled with their jobs and/or the customers. Dissatisfaction was seen as a personal problem that needed to be overcome, often by ignoring the problem. Because trainings were provided, "failure" became a personal issue. I had been trained as had many of the upper management who worked their way up in the company. If I was dissatisfied, then it must be the result of a personal shortcoming (also noted in Leidner 1993:104).

The positive attitude allowed employees to be promoted but it also discouraged them from working towards changes in their work experience. Although there is no quick fix for the strain of working with the public, things such as break times and the lack of supportive mats at the cash registers could have been easily fixed. The denial of frustration, even when constructive criticism, encouraged workers to internalize dissatisfaction as a personal problem rather than relay the issue as a social issue. Langer (1989) warns of the long-lasting impacts of mindlessness such as shorter life expectancy and less elaborate recall about previous experiences (suggesting a lack of complexity and decreased satisfaction). Langer's research also significantly challenges theories of social change by examining the role of influence, expectation and context in which individuals act and react.

### ***Conclusions***

I became the employee I needed to be to successfully get through the day. After a few weeks of working, the daily activities became routine, but at the beginning I struggled to remember the details of each stage of the workday. Knowing when and how to do which aspect of work was not something explicitly stated to me by a training supervisor. Rather, I was socialized by my co-workers sanctioning of my behavioral choices and learned how to organize my labor and energy to complete the plethora of tasks involved in a typical shift.

I eventually learned approximately 100 names of co-workers (including managers) as well as the confidence and nuance necessary to feign knowledge about something if I had forgotten. Spending eight hours in a state

of mental chaos was frustrating and emotionally draining and my energy and attitude improved as I gained confidence in what I knew about doing supermarket work.

During the training sessions it was important to learn the details of the process being demonstrated such as working the cash register or the intricacies of the benefits package. However, it was the personality of the employee that would lead to success within the company. Much like the routinized life insurance sales people in Leidner's (1993) study of fast-food workers and insurance salespeople, the retail clerks at The Supermarket could learn the steps of ringing up orders but those that succeeded, it was explained to me, were the ones that could handle the strain of interacting with disgruntled customers for long stretches of time. You may know the proper way to act, the steps to follow to do a special order, how to answer a customer's question, but if you get frustrated at every step of the interaction it will impact your ability to succeed (i.e. be promoted) within the company.

The Combined Insurance agents in Leidner's (1993) study learned how to knock on the doors of potential clients, but they were consistently reminded that it was their personality that was ultimately going to enable them to be effective salespeople rather than robotic caricatures of one another. Whereas the insurance company trained their representative on how to have, what they called, "Positive Mental Attitude," the strengthening of one's personal approach to the job was not something explicitly taught at The Supermarket.

As discussed above, “doing supermarket work” requires both a physical prowess and a mental acuity that is neither ingrained in the employees nor equally obtainable for them. Classifying supermarket, and retail work in general, as low-skill obscures the complexity of the official and unofficial job requirements. The training sessions offered by The Supermarket were most beneficial to employees who entered them knowing already how to learn. Likewise, being socialized into the group was easier for the workers who could more accurately gauge the sanctioning of their behavior.

One of the most striking features of “doing supermarket work,” managing the relentless boredom, appears at first to be devoid of skill but, as I have argued, does require mastery and control of one’s attitudes and actions. The constant battle for your own attentiveness is often lost when numbness overtakes drive. The contradictory social isolation of retail work – surrounded by thousands but alone – contributes to the detrimental impact of boredom on the worker’s larger social communities.

You are not allowed to sell your body but you are expected to completely resign your mind when you participate in most service interaction work (Leidner 1993). You essentially “rent” your body – your physical presence is needed although your mind may be at ease. There are regulations on drug testing and prostitution but “doing work” raises similar questions of exploitation and the limits of moral engagement. Pushing, yelling, dismissive customers often push workers to their limits and although they may “put on a happy face,” they are expending an enormous amount of energy to maintain the façade.

Keeping your hands and body busy keeps your mind from wandering. The tedium of the details of the job are constructed, intentionally or not, so that employees are so consumed with the detail work that they have little time to imagine alternatives. Even if those alternatives are imagined, there is little time in the day to act on them.

The structure of the retail workplace has created a workforce that spends a large portion of their waking hours engaged in work that reinforces larger social inequality. There is nothing wrong with cashiering and stocking the shelves; it is not the job that has the issues it is the treatment of the workers that constructs this inequality. This, again, brings us back to the inherent components of an entry level retail job. The reality is that there is a need for cashiers at retail outlets and although cashiering will never be on the list of greatest all-time jobs to have there are enough workers in search of a job, any job, that the positions will always be filled.



## **CHAPTER SEVEN:**

### **THE MANAGEMENT OF OTHERS – DOING CUSTOMER SERVICE**

This chapter broadens the focus on retail employees by examining how shop floor workers manage themselves and others, particularly the customers, in the customer service interchange. This chapter extends Dixon's (2003) argument that retailers construct themselves as legitimate authority figures, both in the food system and larger consumerist society, through the work of their *administrative* staff by arguing that the customer service interaction between *front-line* workers and shoppers also serves to solidify the retailers' positioning. Empirical evidence from The Supermarket shop floor contributed significant data to further our understanding of authority in practice.

When we think of customer service as an interaction, rather than something given by a worker to a customer, the shift in perspective allows us to examine the complexity of the situations when customers and retailers come in contact with one another. The intended goal of customer service, often assumed by customers and proclaimed by the corporation's public relations department, is to provide information, assistance and sales help to shoppers and potential purchasers. If we think of customer service as a process and a practice, as the etiquette of buying and selling, it allows us to examine the ways in which social interactions shape our perceptions of appropriate behavior in the workplace, specifically at a supermarket. How shoppers treat interactive service workers, and how they treat shoppers, reflects not only societal attitudes towards particular economic status positions but also a larger social, cultural and economic inequality pervasive in a modern capitalist society. This chapter

looks beyond the common notion of service as something provided, pro bono, to the customer and instead conceptualizes it as any and all relations that occur between two particular social groups, workers and shoppers, on the supermarket shop floor.

Shopping may be an anonymous experience in that customers and employees do not have a personal relationship outside of the retail store, but anonymous is not, by definition, impersonal. One customer in a rush who ignores an employee does not feel the impact of the hundred customers prior and the hundred customers post who will treat the cashier in a similar fashion. The experience of repeatedly being disregarded by the other component in the social interaction of customer service takes a physical and mental toll on the person attempting the communication. As Bolton and Houlihan (2005) argue (in Korczynski 2009:75), “we need to be able to bring the humanity back into the analysis of service work.”

Shopping is a social practice and, as such, is a learned activity. Zukin’s (2004) study of shopping in a New York City neighborhood illustrates the various forms of human, social, cultural and economic capital required to be a competent shopper (whether one finds shopping enjoyable is a moot point). What Zukin (2004) overlooks in her study is the social interaction of shoppers with employees, other customers, products and the space that reproduces a social inequality. They neither cause nor resist it and the subtlety of the socialization process belies the complexity of the customer service interaction between the shopper and the worker. For the interactive service worker,

learning to manage both the customers and the customer service interaction itself was one of the most difficult tasks of “doing retail work.”

The relationship between the employee and the managers/retailer will be bracketed off from consideration here in order to privilege the employee-customer relationship that has often been overlooked. Hierarchical work structures contain hundreds of lower level clerks for every mid-level manager, and even fewer store and corporate managers. Although the “behind the scenes” managers wrote the rules and made operation decisions, it is the front-line work that is most interesting as it is the lived experience of bureaucracy. It is customer service, in practice. Furthermore, the shop floor perspective allows the customer to be brought into the store, the interaction and, hence, the analysis.

MacLean (1899), in her study of department store workers, found the conditions deplorable and worried about the fate of the young, impoverished workers. Over a hundred years later, limits on the workday have been instituted but the devaluing of the work and the workers still remains. Social change has focused on materiality such as hours and wages but the subtler and less litigious social aspects of interactive work have yet to be fully acknowledged. The structure of the customer service interaction, itself, has also changed dramatically over time. As Humphery (1998) chronicles in his study of the food retailing industry, the focus on self-service aisles made the position of the informed grocer obsolete and instead required “low-skill” clerks to replenish the shelves and have little substantive interaction with customers. By examining the customer service interchange, as it occurs today on the

supermarket shop floor, I hope to illuminate the complexities of a taken for granted social interaction dominated by the internalized consumerist ideals of modern capitalism (see Bauman 1998).

The Supermarket customers enquired about everything from the price of an item to the weather to our opinion about whether their relationship could be salvaged and expected employees to respond appropriately at all times. On break? It doesn't matter, they have a "quick" question. Don't know the answer? It doesn't matter, they just want you to say something. Don't know which is better? It doesn't matter, just pick one please. High turnover rates in the retail sector illustrate the difficulty of this learning curve. The employees who succeeded were the ones who remained in their positions; those who failed left the company. Interactive retail work can be unrelenting in a large busy store and requires an immense amount of mental dexterity to endure interacting with the general public. I have never experienced and witnessed such harassment, insult and misery as when I was working at the supermarket. Many customer service interactions were unremarkable and the moments passed quickly if not memorably. But more customers than expected were unpleasant to deal with. Some had body odors that were so strong it made it difficult to be in their proximity, some were so impatient that they were already upset that a particular item was not in stock before they had actually asked for it, and the worst were dismissive of us as actual human beings – yelling, pushing, and ignoring us when we spoke to them.

There is a particular circularity to the tensions in the customer service interaction and it is difficult to conclude which came first, the inept retail worker

or the rude customer. Working in a supermarket is a physically strenuous job in itself (as discussed in Chapter Five) but it is the engagement with the general public on the shop floor that elicited the most discussion amongst employees, and fury in my field notes. My field notes, read from beginning to end, illustrate the work skills honed through months of experience on the shop floor. Not only did I improve in “doing work,” I was able to learn the techniques necessary for self-preservation in an interactive, front-line, low-wage job.

The examples presented in this chapter illustrate the complexities involved in “doing customer service work” that only occasionally involved providing service for the customer.

As agents of the retailer, workers were expected to know, respect and enact the corporate credo of satisfying the customer. Learning to “do work,” as discussed in Chapter Six can prepare the interactive service worker in merely a cursory way. There is no amount of training than can replace the knowledge gained from experience. The Supermarket offered a course with the explicit goal of helping employees become more adroit customer service representatives and appear knowledgeable to customers. Unlike the trainings at the insurance agency in Leidner’s study (1993) the supermarket training sessions were not intended to “spur people to work toward their goals without being held back” (p. 103). Ostensibly an entirely different industry with different roles for the sales people, the focus on personal wellbeing observed by Leidner (1993) was not observed during my employment.

During the customer service training at The Supermarket, I asked for tips in dealing with the anxiety and frustration surrounding the customer-employee interaction. Although I was told to just “let it go,” it was mentioned that those who learn to deal with it are the ones who get promoted. It isn’t that they have become the best at the customer service exchange – rather they have developed a strategy to maintain their sense of integrity and calm, even when it requires the customer to be ignored. Being an efficient worker requires one to not be irritated or frustrated. As Leidner (1993) found, being enthusiastic at work is much more personally satisfying than being disgruntled. As religion may be the opiate of the masses, a positive work attitude may be the opiate of the retail work force. Having good faith in one’s work may ease the acceptance of an otherwise uncomfortable job but it subtly reinforces the subordination of the needs of individuals to those of the corporation. Some employees, used to being treated poorly by customers soon give up on any attempt at “successful” interactions. The few who are able to master their emotions and find a self-worth otherwise are the ones who eventually get promoted and move up off of the sales floor through the corporate rankings. This chapter illustrates the struggle of the supermarket shop floor.

The examples in this chapter illustrate typical customer service interactions and suggest a denial of the individual rather than recognition. I am not arguing that customers were intentionally trying to harm individual workers as that would assume too much of a recognition of the actual workers themselves. To the contrary, I am arguing that the norms of the customer service interaction allow the “customer” to treat the “worker” as a position rather than a person. The personality quirks of particular workers certainly irritated some customers

but it was rarely a personality conflict that elicited negative sanctioning from the customers. As the comments below suggest, workers were seen as fair fodder in customer attacks even when obviously and logically not implicit in the creation of the upset.

The interactions between employees and customers often frustrated all involved. The examples contained in this chapter suggest that it is not the interaction itself that contributes to employee alienation (Korczynski 2009), but rather the repetition of the interaction. It should be noted that many jobs involve repetition, but front-line interactive service workers experience the repetition not of a task or an accomplishment but of the devaluing of their social position, relative to the unmanaged customer.

“Producing consumption” is the totality of the processes involved in the sale of commodity supermarket items. Inherent in that procedure is the customer service work done through the employees’ management of others – the practice of the retail worker exerting influence over the customer service exchange. This chapter begins by elaborating the development of informal scripts used by employees to exert control over the interaction, despite their constantly reinforced subordinate position. Next, the customer in customer-service is often reduced to a totalizing conglomerate and despite each interaction appearing as unremarkable, the repetition risks employee alienation. The customer service interaction reiterates the social inequality of the customer-worker relation and the subordination of the needs of individuals (workers) for those of the retailer. Finally, this chapter addresses the spread of

mis-information and the use of feigned knowledge as a management technique to control, however inaccurately, the customer service exchange.

### ***Scripts***

One of the main techniques used by The Supermarket employees to efficiently perform the social interaction of customer service was the development of informal scripts. Rather than approach each interaction as unique, employees learned particular patterns of dialogue and stuck to them regardless of how contrary the situation appeared. Informal scripts are the lines repeated by employees as a method to construct, control and ultimately end, the interaction. Service work scripts are typically written by the retailer to convey a particular meaning or the tone of the interaction and service workers are assumed to unwittingly follow corporate scripts rather than act on their own accord. It is for this reason that Ritzer (2005) calls them “simulated people” (p. 103). What he notes as the employee’s lack of agency in modern consumer society serves to dehumanize retail workers, Williams (2006) argues, and that in order to see the “physical effort, emotional stamina, and self control” (p. 93) required in the retail sector, we must look at the service interaction from the perspective of the worker. From the perspective of the customer, the scripts illustrated below might provoke anger and frustration but from the perspective of the employee we can begin to see the development of the qualities that separate the successful shop floor clerks from the rest.

Scripts emerged from interactions that were repeated throughout the day. While shopping during field site visits, my comments, as a customer, are neither heard nor acknowledged and the cashiers’ attention is fully



(pre)occupied by a co-worker. While I was working at the supermarket, I received a discount on my purchases. I had to show my store ID card (no exceptions to this rule without management approval) after the cashier finished ringing up my items. More often than not, despite mentioning that I was an employee and having my ID card out, the cashier would tell me the total and then go back to talking to someone else. I would have to wait until she became exasperated that I was taking so long to pay to get her attention so that she could enter my discount. The script, in this instance, was interrupted by the customer deviating from the expected lines. The rigidity of the cashier's script allowed her to complete thousands of similar transactions during the day and homogenize the experience of checking out. By stating her lines and then disengaging, the script became two competing monologues rather than a dialogue.

Despite my knowledge of the "scene" detailed in the excerpt below, I was unable to recalibrate the employee's customer service script.

The clerk, when I asked her about the particular chocolate bar that was out of stock, told me that it was out of stock. Yes, I replied, I can see that. I am actually wondering if you know when it will be back in stock. Uh-uh, she replied and then was able to entirely end our interaction by turning her back to me and going back to her task. Had I pressed her further, she probably would have just walked away as it seems one of the most effective means of ending an unwanted interaction.

I knew from my own training that the product was out of stock, not just sold out on the shelf (the shelf tag was upside down) but oftentimes employees at my store were alerted about when out of stock products would be available. The information was provided to all employees but how it was incorporated into

their respective customer service interactions was variable. There is, of course, the distinct possibility that she really did not know when the chocolate bar would be back in stock. Her non-answer, “uh-uh,” can be understood as a strategic answer when the customer service interchange is not assessed based on actually servicing the customer (providing a legitimate, thoughtful, accurate response) but rather the process of social interaction between two unequal groups. In this example, the clerk is able to maintain the management of her self (both physical and mental) by acting as gatekeeper and denying access to the information desired. The “uh-uh” response is much easier to provide and does not require a complex understanding of the distribution process – she did not need to know how to read the shelf tag, check the log book for product updates, or contact a supervisor over the intercom for assistance. The non-response is not without its complexity, however, and employees providing this type of answer to a customer inquiry had to develop strategies for deflecting anger and frustration; in the illustration provided above, the employee walked away.

The informal script of the customer appeared less contrived and predictable but when not followed it elicited the same awkwardness. Queuing for the cash register lines provoked one of two predictable responses in customers and illustrates the ubiquity of the point of purchase experience. The first response to forming and waiting in line was calm – the customer could accurately and appropriately read the signals of the transaction occurring ahead and would wait until the customer walked away to approach the cash register and worker. The second response was one of insecurity and frustration – unable to adequately assess the unfolding scene the customer would begin swaying,

pacing or otherwise indicating impatience. Often times, these customers would use a raised voice to ask a cashier if she was ready yet. The inability, or unwillingness, of these customers to recognize that the worker was in the process of “doing work,” as illustrated by these contradictory “scripts” for queuing, created an environment in which the construction of the reality of the retail experience was unduly influenced by the customers and unfairly denied the perspective of the worker.

The example below presents a well-rehearsed script used by a manager to thwart over-eager customers from trying to “cut” in the checkout lines.

I went to the front of the main check out line and asked Linda (the manager) if I could sneak in because I had to be at work in a few minutes. She gave me a dirty look and through an awkward interchange, told me “In the spirit of fairness, this is really considered cutting.” She certainly made me feel ashamed of my presumptuousness, but she let me do it. I really thought I was following protocol. When I showed my ID card to the cashier I told her I had just gotten yelled at. She responded, “This place makes me want to die.”

When the manager was walking through my department later she recognized me as the “cutter” and approached me. I was expecting to get yelled at again and my face flushed but she actually apologized and said she didn’t recognize me earlier and didn’t realize I had to be at work *at the store*. She admitted that she had developed her scripted response to sternly discourage customers from doing the same and that she delivered it often throughout the day. I found myself surprised at my intense emotional response and grateful for the apology.

Leidner (1993), in her study of fast food and insurance salespeople, notes that the success of both of the companies in her study were dependent on employee's willingness to follow the corporate-written script. The scripted lines "read" on The Supermarket shop floor were not sanctioned by the corporate management, but nonetheless were developed and used in an effort to control the customer service interaction to the benefit of the worker. Customers were quickly sized up and lines were delivered, often to an accepting audience. Occasionally, the larger script would come undone and if the employee was unable to handle the ad lib sales exchange, he or she would seek assistance from a co-worker who might have learned the "lines" for a service strategy that worked.

The example below illustrates the potential anomie that can result from a script not being followed, or in this case, being perceived to have not been followed.

As a customer was leaving he said thank you to Barbara and then, "YOU'RE WELCOME" in a forceful tone. About 10 minutes later he came back in and slammed things down on my counter and told me he wanted to return things. He said that Barbara was very rude and that when he said thank you, he expected that she say you're welcome in return. He wanted to return his items because he didn't want to shop at a rude store that had such a problem. I do think she was actually the one that said thank you first to him when she handed him his change and the receipt (it is so ingrained).

A similar misstep from the typical script, the excerpt below illustrates a very different type of reaction from a customer and was fodder for many laughs amongst the employees:

Towards the end of the night, a customer said “thank you” and I replied, “you’re right.” We all got a very good chuckle out of that, especially the customer, who wasn’t upset in any way by my strange response.

The customer had already stepped away from the cash register but paused when she heard my response. It was not until she turned around and looked at me quizzically that I realized that my “line” should have been either “you’re welcome” or “thank you.” The unintentional skewing of the script provided a moment of lightness in the social interaction otherwise fraught with social tension. The ability of the workers to laugh, even for a second, allowed for a social reality premised on equal access to resources (in this case, humor).

“The promise” of bureaucracy assures customers that they can accurately anticipate the shopping experience found within the supermarket. Leider (1993) argues that McDonald’s promise to provide “uniform products and consistent service” (82) significantly influences their approach to managing, and hence attempting to control, the experience of being on either side of the counter. The company uses specific and particular methodologies to ensure predictability in order to maximize the efficiency of the scripted routines. By using “socialization and control techniques” (82), the company intends to exert its control over the social practice of shopping, in this case for a hamburger, fries and soda. A supermarket, offering tens of thousands of choices rather than 40-50, cannot attempt to present corporate sanctioned scripts for every situation although it has broken down many tasks into their most basic components (in theory if not in practice). The hyper-rationalized reduction of processes to their parts highlights how the focus on the components often obscures the totality. Frustration within the customer service interchange often

occurred when one party became fixated on the delivery of the script rather than the meaning of the “scene.”

Employee expression is limited by the highly rationalized workplace and the boundaries of their environment. Much of the decision-making at The Supermarket happened far from the shop floor and although employees within the stores seem to have more autonomy over their movements and speech than the McDonald’s workers in Leidner’s (1993) study, this does not indicate that the supermarket is a less centralized workplace. They do not have to follow a script, *per se*, but because they exist in such a controlled and limited space, what they do say to customers does not vary widely. The “unofficial” socialization process was equally intense as the formal training and sanctions administered by co-workers held equally considered rewards and punishments.

The development and deployment of scripts can be understood as the management of emotion, of both the employee and the customer. Tolich (1993), in his study of emotions and customer service, argued that cashiers were doing both emotional labor and emotion work (see Hochschild [1983] 2003a) when they presented an embellished corporate customer service script. The augmentation of the standard performance script complicated the classification of the cashier’s behavior as emotional labor (a commodified exchange value) or emotion work (personified use value) because although the *work* was being done by the cashier, the *labor* was being paid for by the retailer.

What Tolich (1993) terms emotion management is a useful tool for analyzing the informal scripts developed by the shop floor clerks but his focus on control, rather than ownership, overlooks two important details. First, the informal scripts used at The Supermarket seem like poor choices to convey a helpful, positive customers service experience. Their use on the shop floor indicates that either management did not comprehend the ubiquity of the scripts or that they were not concerned by the customer service presentation style. Returning to Langer's (1989) concept of mindlessness, is the employee really in control of her own emotion management when (encouraged to be) operating in a diminished state of being? Second, Tolich (1993) argues that emotion management provides cashiers with a sense of satisfaction and decreases their alienation because of the increased sense of control they experience by conceiving of, and employing, their own customer service scripts.

The examples illustrated above seem to inhibit and terminate interactions rather than foster communication. Although there is the possibility of worker satisfaction emerging from the cessation of interaction, the dismissal of the actual task at hand is also denied and this complicates an understanding of satisfaction as pride in a job *well done*. The worker may emerge from the interaction with a smaller scar from a customer lashing but does the expenditure of energy required to deny the work provide a tangible benefit?

The script of disengaged customer service, the strategic lines repeated by the employees and the typical questions from the customers belie two distinct phenomena. First, the prepared generalized comments allow the disengaged employee to "do work." Second, the acceptance, by the customers, of vague

information indicates a willingness to accept a statement as a statement regardless of whether it is logical or meaningful in itself. Informal scripts can be read in all of the customer service interactions excerpted from the field notes throughout this chapter, even if not explicitly detailed.

### ***Doing social inequality***

The customer service relationship reproduces the status of the employee as such while “doing work.” When workers are viewed as extensions of the retailer, a corporate behemoth, they are treated as equally inanimate objects on the shop floor and devalued as human beings. In Hochschild’s ([1983] 2003a) study, the Delta flight attendants are reminded that when customers become irate on flights they are mad at the uniform, the Delta company, not the actual person enrobed in it. Likewise, The Supermarket employees wearing the branded aprons were treated as iconic extensions of the corporation. The aprons are worn and experienced by actual human beings who are more complex than the stereotypical notion of “service workers.” The particularity of the customer is also denied. The “rules” of the bureaucratic corporation are there to ensure that everyone is entitled to the same service. This may, in fact, cut down on discrimination and service that is dependent on the whim of the provider, but it also reduces every customer’s experience to one that can be generalized and every employee’s experience to being a worker rather than a human being.

Technological advancements such as the cell phone also contribute to the impact of the negative effect of the customer service interaction on workers – the growing ubiquity of cell phone conversations during the face-to-face



exchange between the worker and the customer suggests a diminished presence of the worker and an exaggerated presence of the customer (and phone companion). In general, customers ignored employees' presence regardless of cell phones. I would say hello to no response, I would tell them the total and not be acknowledged, I would put their items in a bag only to be told, after everything was packed, that they didn't want a bag. Cashiers, used to being ignored by customers preoccupied with the cell phones and/or personal conversations, give prompts to facilitate the payment process regardless of necessity. Shoppers, often waiting for the credit card machine to give the next prompt, are often instructed by an impatient cashier to "hit enter" before allowed the opportunity to press the button on their own accord.

One particularly frustrating aspect of the service worker job is the assertion by customers that their interpretation of interactions is the legitimate reality of the situation. Customers rarely reacted positively to being asked to wait a moment while employees finished a task. I might have known that I was in the middle of a task, but because I did not appear *to the customers* to be doing something tangible, they became very frustrated and irritated that I was exerting my own dominance over the shopping interaction that they were instigating. This social interaction between customer and employee reinforces the presumed social value of each actor – the customer demanding attention on her schedule and the employee then put in the position of defending her ability to be a legitimate actor in the interaction.

When employees did not immediately respond to customer inquiries, they were assumed to be incompetent and a more knowledgeable replacement

worker was demanded. Most customers preferred a quick, inaccurate, response than a longer, considered one and it was to the benefit of the social welfare of the employee to develop scripted replies to answer a variety of customer questions. Speaking rudely, or talking back, to customers was expressly prohibited and although the folklore of the employee who hit a customer and stayed employed to tell the story was frequently told in the break room in hushed voices, for the most part self-defense took more subversive measures. Ignoring customers was, seemingly, one of the most effective methods of disengagement with the negative stimuli of a dismissive tone or yelling yet this style of interaction was also present in more benign exchanges.

The example below illustrates the precariousness of retail work. A customer entered the customer-service interaction irritated yet found it appropriate and legitimate to direct her anger at an unrelated worker.

A customer left an armful of items in front of my register and so I asked her if she would mind putting the things in a basket, so I could make some room for other people to check out. She called later to complain that I had been rude to her. A supervisor asked me my side of the story and she remembered the customer snapping at another customer in the store. I was visibly shaken by this, and Vivian said she had to ask the lady who she was calling about twice, because she didn't think it could have possibly been me [everyone amazingly thinks I am really sweet!]. Vivian had to tell Susan, the big boss, because it was an official customer complaint [ . . . ] I stand by my actions, but am so nervous that I could possibly lose my job for something entirely out of my control. I have seen employees lie, be snappy, ignore customers and I felt like a complete ass for asking this woman to put her things in a basket?

The customer was extremely upset and her feelings are entirely valid, this cannot and should not be denied. What I am arguing here is that anger is

being misdirected at vulnerable workers caught in the crossfire of tensions in the customer-retailer relationship. The instability of the worker's position and the primacy of the customer allow for the complaints to be registered officially, the employees sanctioned, and the customers apologized to by the retailer. Each act within each component reifies the retailer as the protector of the customer (taking their individuality seriously and treated them with respect and dignity) and further strengthens the role of the retailer as a source of legitimate authority in a consumerist society.

The most upset I ever got at work is documented in my field notes below. The anger expressed is the result of months of similar interactions and the sting of the words this woman expressed to me. The disconnect between the image she perceived, the way she treated me and my understanding of my self was so dramatic that it jarred my composure to the point of no-response.

I was told today that I am “warmer hearted” than I appear. A woman rushed into the store, [interrupted me and asked for help.] I was clearly busy assisting a customer, so I assumed she was speaking to someone behind me and went back to the transaction. [ . . . ] She then comes up to my register to check out and I ask her if she needs a bag. [ . . . ] She says, “Even although I have my bags over there (Which I think she asked Jessica to carry over) I said I would like a bag.” I said, yes, I heard you but that one [is broken]. She replies, “oh, you are warmer hearted than you appear.” I had to have her repeat it to me. Really, I said? Do I seem to be a cold-hearted person? She said yes, and that I should let that nice person out. I wanted to scream at her I WOULD HAVE BEEN NICER HAD YOU NOT TREATED ME LIKE A COMPLETE PIECE OF TRASH UPON ENTERING THE STORE YOU FUCKING ASSHOLE. But I didn't. I just said okay. [ . . . ] She said she was telling me to be helpful, not critical. [ . . . ] I really wanted to jump across the counter and strangle her.

Aside from the assumptions about my personality and capabilities, it is of note that a customer felt qualified to express her analysis of an employee's personality after such a limited interaction. Although employees often quickly assessed a customer's proclivity for selling strategies, holistic assessment about personalities and social engagement were rarely expressed or hinted at. Integral to "doing work" in the supermarket is the disabling of the personal expression of the worker. Although I had to receive criticism about myself, I was not allowed to express my own feelings towards customers – or in a direct way towards co-workers.

The example below details the technique I developed in order to force my position in the social interaction of customer service. It worked quite effectively most of the time but, ultimately, two angry people is no better than one. If my goal was to create a veil of respect around my role as a cashier, this strategy did little more than irritate the customer. I doubt they changed their behavior the next time they entered into a customer service interaction and based on the interactions I have with cashiers while doing observations, they are doing little to force change. Furthermore, their treatment of me was probably unintentional or at least subconscious. My treatment of them was a highly manipulated game with the intention of a negative sanction for their behavior.

And then [the customers] approach the check out counter on their cell phones. They put their products just a bit too far away so that I have to oddly reach over the wide counter to get them, all the while discussing whatever the hell they are discussing on their cell phones. The "polite" version involves giving me the "oh, I am so sorry, this is a really important call" look. I tend to just keep talking to them as if they are not on the phone. Hello? How are you? Do you want a bag? [ . . . ] Then, when they throw their cash down on the counter, my ridiculous passive-aggressive method of getting back at them is to put the bag between

the cash and me to “block” it from my sight. Then I repeat the amount again and hold out my hand. They often look really confused.

In the example above, I use the point of purchase script to attempt to wrangle the control of the interaction being denied to me by the irritated and distracted customer. I felt entitled to perform my lines and the customer’s unwillingness to comply caused aggravation and frustration. Likewise, employees’ disregard for the customers’ reality of the phone call often caused further irritation.

Occasionally, the same customers were pleasant to interact with in the aisles were terrors at the cash register. The polite banter of the assistance process disappeared to reveal the interactions they saw as appropriate for the relations between a cashier and a customer. Sales clerk and cashier, although the same person fulfilling each role, held such different status positions that customers did not adjust their mental frameworks to accommodate the same person in each position.

Customers were certainly not all malicious and many did express thanks as part of their own script for the customer service interaction. One particularly nice interaction is described below:

A customer told me that the supermarket doesn’t pay me enough. I laughed and agreed with her. She then laughed and said she was serious. I told her I was serious as well. I am not sure what she was trying to get at with her comment, but it was nice to be recognized.

The encounter is significant for three reasons. First, someone being nice, even complimentary, to me was surprising because it was out of the ordinary. I helped hundreds of customers a day and this is the only overt compliment I made a note of receiving. Second, she was not only kind to me, she, herself,

was pleasant to interact with. Customers often invaded our personal space by standing too close or smelling strongly of foul smells and this involuntary aspect of the work included in the customer service interaction is often overlooked. Third, like the customer who acknowledged Williams as someone “friendly” and invited her to join her congregation (Williams 2006:135), the compliment suggested a mutual respect that so often is lacking in the customer service exchange. The customer did not only acknowledge my physical presence by speaking directly to me (rather than at me), she saw beyond my apron and noticed the quality of my particular behavior, as an individual. Unlike Williams, I did not take this positive interaction as encouragement of a better future but, rather, the realization of the constraints of modern consumerist society.

The example below, taken from my field notes during a shopping observation, illustrates the frustration that can occur during one of the most basic customer service exchanges, the point of purchase:

I went to a chain drugstore to buy dish gloves and [ . . . n]ot only did it take a while for the cashier to stop talking (to her boss!!!) and actually acknowledge my presence, but then once she rang me up, I couldn't get her attention to hand her the money and then she just stood there holding my money and still complaining about how the morning shift never did the work that the evening shift was required to do. Then she asked me for another dollar, but I had handed her enough and it was really frustrating to say the least.

As the customer being ignored, the example above was frustrating to experience. Read without personal emotion it can be understood as the grasping for time, autonomy and control by the employee in an otherwise subordinate position. Learning to moderate one's contact and involvement with

the customers, i.e. learning to manage others, was one of the most challenging trials of working an interactive service job.

The Supermarket underwent a major renovation during my employment and customer comments about the renovation were overwhelmingly negative and almost always directed at a low-level clerk who had no input over design or execution. Furthermore, management provided little guidance for dealing with the upset customers and employees were left to manage the interactions on their own. These customer service exchanges were fraught with the tension contained in a dissatisfied shopper and intensified the negativity directed at low-level workers.

The renovation is not a big hit with customers and the employees also think it looks a bit shoddy. Many customers have relevant comments – the lights are too bright, the shelving looks cheap, we lost too many items, etc. But then there is a large minority of [upset] customers [ . . . ] and I mean yelling upset, about the change in general. “Why did you have to change it? I just don’t understand? This is miserable, I can’t find anything.” The hilarious thing is that there are plenty of employees [to help the customers] and people don’t often buy that much.

Although I was never able to observe customers making official complaints to management or customer service representatives, I was the receiver of plenty of criticisms myself (and rarely about my own service, although that happened on occasion as well). As the store was being renovated, customers felt it appropriate to lodge their concerns with me. They told me that their thoughts on the lighting, the change in product locations, the color of the walls, if it had changed or if it remained the same, they commented on it. I would sometimes suggest that they call or write to the management as I had absolutely nothing to do with the decision making process. Most of the time it seemed as if they

were completely ignoring what I was saying and just want to say what they were saying.

Trying to be proactive and help the customers communicate their anger and frustration, I brought over a pad of paper from the Customer Service desk so that they could officially lodge their complaints – only a handful actually did and then they rarely left their names and contact information. The surprising factor is that shoppers were expressing important attitudes about the store to workers they otherwise treated with little respect. This contradiction illustrates again the primacy of the customer in determining and enacting the customer service interaction and hints at the role of the retailer in our consumerist society.

The national chain store has become a neighborhood institution and people consider the store “theirs” – they have chosen the store and want it to behave as they desire. Although the products inside seem to be secondary and fluid, as are the employees, the physical store stays static and customers come to depend on that. They want choice, but they don’t want change. The customers had an expectation of what the shopping environment should be and expected a stable environment in which to perform their scripts. The Supermarket is a large U.S. chain of supermarkets, but customers felt that they should have been consulted before such a large change was instituted. Employees, as discussed previously, expressed more of a surprised reaction to the perceived oversight of ergonomics, and workers’ wellbeing, in the renovation.



These social dealings often resulted, I am arguing, in the implicit reiteration of a larger social inequality inherent in the current U.S. capitalist system.

Regardless of the pride and value found, *by the employee* in the work, the typical customer service interaction reproduced the subordination of workers while privileging the position of the customer. I am not arguing that “the customer is always right,” rather, I am arguing that the processes and practices of buying and selling construct a social inequality of social roles that produces unequal access to resources as varied as privacy, social services and respect. In “doing work” in a retail setting, the workplace is more than the relationships between the managers and the clerks. The unmanaged customers, although physically present in the employees’ workplace, are not assumed within corporate ideologies of work. When the customer service exchange is extricated from other social interactions, and analyzed as its own microcosm of social behavior, the implicit norms, values and structuring contradict current corporate-produced statements regarding assurance of human value, self-worth, and decency in the workplace.

### ***Selling mis-information***

The bureaucratic nature of the corporation allowed for miscommunication in the form of communication by privileging the guardian of the exchange with the ability to proceed or terminate the encounter. Unlike the “simulated people” in Ritzer’s (2005) “simulated interactions,” in which workers in the consumer goods industry become interchangeable automatons, personality played a distinguishing role in the customer service interchanges at The Supermarket. The enactment of the written rules of the corporation was only as strong as the *human enforcers*.

The workers' assertion of their control over the customer service interaction inadvertently reinforced the retail organization as a legitimate authority figure – the corporate procedure that was being defended or deflected by the employee was not written to preserve her best interest, it was designed to meet the needs of the retailer. By allowing front-line service workers to manage and negotiate their own positioning while concurrently structuring their position to hold limited autonomy and security, the retailer inevitably triumphed in most exchanges. The lenience with which most workers were governed allowed for subservience to be understood as independence - the workers are not simulations of real workers but they are, first and foremost, extensions of the corporate entity with the primary goal of ensuring the efficient and profitable management of the company.

Most interactions between current and potential employees were also used as an opportunity for intensive socialization. If you are to succeed in *getting* the job, you must learn *how* to do the job and therefore the norms of the hiring process were stubbornly enforced, as illustrated by the interaction below:

I gave up and went to customer service. I asked the first person I saw if I could leave my cover letter and resume with him. He said, "Well, no. I wouldn't know who to give it to." I suggested he give it to the manager. He responded that he wouldn't know what to do with it. That it wasn't the appropriate way to get a job and that they would give me a call in a week if I filled out an application online. I asked if there was any way I could speak to someone about a job and he told me, like other employees have told me, that the proper way to get a job is on the Internet. That is how they got hired, and that is the way it works.

The example illustrates the complexity of "customer" service, particularly when the customer is a potential employee. My suggestion that he follow my

“logical” suggestion to give the resume to the manager seemed to encourage him to stick to his logical script. I was familiar with The Supermarket and its “official” policies and during shopping observations witnessed a high-level of employee divergence from the corporate produced procedural guidelines (the basis for many verbal scripts) in order to allow a greater level of control over the situation. Unused to informed customers versed in the corporate policies of The Supermarket, workers were able to authoritatively present their personal scripts as officially sanctioned to most customers. By refusing my resume the worker was protecting the retailer from generating waste, extra paperwork, the cost of the time required to read it, meet me, etc., yet it is significant that the behavior was conditioned as a way of protecting the individual. It is only when we take the totality of the individual interactions into consideration that we can see a larger, somewhat unintentional, affirmation of the retail structure.

The process of learning how to sell, not only how to work, socialized employees to use a time/energy management tool of “feigned knowledge.” Stock phrases such as “We must be sold out,” “We don’t carry that product,” or “yes, that is a lovely choice” were used to inhibit the expansion of a customer’s question into a larger, and longer, dialogue. Oftentimes, these statements were provided regardless of evidence to the contrary: “We must be sold out” was often used when a customer mentioned not being able to find a particular product; “we don’t carry that product” was often the retort to a customer’s inquiry about a product an employee was unfamiliar with; and “yes, that is a lovely choice” was used to compliment the customer’s decision but rarely based on experience with the actual product.

The employees I witnessed incorporating these techniques into their repertoire of scripts did not appear to be vindictive and it was some of the kindest employees that used these lines the most often. The lines were overheard and then innocently repeated by others yet these vague statements do not expose an ignorance or lack of training. When an employee responds to a customer's inquiry with a response such as "we must be sold out" or "we don't carry that product" they are, intentionally or not, presenting themselves as knowledgeable. By expressing "comprehension" of the larger systemic workings of the supermarket and providing what appears to be a concrete and knowledgeable response they are able to end the customer service interaction or, at the least, extricate themselves from it.

One of the most difficult aspects of the selling process is learning to read the buying process of the customer asking for help. Some customers wanted affirmation for the product they had already chosen and actually did not want to discuss the matter further. However, some customers had no interest in choosing an item themselves and would take whatever was suggested, regardless of price or quantity. Many customers detested hearing that the product they were looking for was not available – if it was something that The Supermarket did not carry, many customers became livid.<sup>23</sup> Regardless of the feasibility of stocking the item, customers expected their desires to be fulfilled at The Supermarket. In my boldest moments, that were only successful when I had accurately read the temperament of the customer, I could get away with suggesting an alternative. In unsuccessful moments, customers yelled at me,

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<sup>23</sup> There was, of course, a substantial silent majority of customers who did not discuss their reactions, negative or positive, with the employees. Often, the interactions between customers and clerks were entirely benign – desires were easily met and both parties were able to interact with a basic level of human decency.

accused me of not knowing what I was talking about and demanded to speak to another sales clerk. This worked in reverse as well and I stepped in, like my co-workers, as “the other salesclerk,” to assist a customer that had just yelled at a co-worker.

Often, these customers wanted to purchase something to assuage their ills and an employees’ suggestion for an alternative, any alternative, was welcomed and resulted in a “satisfied” customer when the customers’ attitude had been accurately appraised. The belief that the market can solve problems can trump logic and reason and the employee is therefore seen as a hindrance between the customer and the “solution” being found in the supermarket.

Locating an unfamiliar product for a customer could be a satisfying challenge (like a puzzle) but was often a source of frustration for all involved. When a customer was looking for something in a broad category – the milk, the bakery, or the soap – it was relatively easy to satisfy their inquiry. When a customer wanted something more specific, however, the propensity of the social interaction to turn contentious increased exponentially. In many of these instances, it was not ignorance that was feigned by the workers, but knowledge. Williams (2006) argues that workers earning low-wages know relatively little about the products they are selling – the advice she and her co-workers gave them, “literally made up” (p. 114).

The employees that I witnessed expressing the sentiments portrayed in this chapter rarely exhibited any signs of contradiction in their scripts. When the

customer service interactions were discussed amongst the workers (and they were discussed numerous times per day) the topic of feigning knowledge never arose. The concept of mis-information, this presentation of feigned knowledge, furthers the retailer's positioning as an authority because it presents a front-line sales force of confident workers able to assuage customer insecurity about product choice. Official customer service trainings did not teach techniques nor encourage feigning knowledge but, regardless, misinformation proliferated on the sales floor.

A particularly frustrating aspect of "doing customer service work" at The Supermarket was listening to employees and customers misunderstand each other. Sometimes I could seamlessly jump in and offer direction, "oh, Jenny, I think that items is over there, right?," but entering the interaction may have made the situation worse. If I did not know the answer to the question being asked, trying to help the employee understand the question would have been fruitless since it would likely result in a frustrated customer. If I had the energy and if the customer seemed nice, I would offer to help. "Oh, Dylan, I can show her where the product is if you want." A few notable times, described below, the misunderstandings indicated more than a simple miscommunication. Retail clerks are the mediators between two significant sets: the customer and the retailer *and* the customers and the product manufacturers. Assumed and accepted as a legitimate source of not only service but also authority, clerks shaped customer purchases as well as their ideas about items and ideologies.

The example below illustrates the heightened, although not necessarily sharpened, consumer awareness about connections between food and health:

Today a man was giving customers free samples of a juice flavored water [ . . . ] targeted towards kids as a low calorie, low sugar drink. I stopped and asked him what they were using to sweeten the drink and he replied that it is crystalline fructose. In the three minutes I was standing there talking to him, a few other customers asked about the drink and specifically the sugar content. People were saying all sorts of things about sweeteners and neither they nor the owner (turns out the guy giving samples is the company owner!) knew what they were talking about. The difference being that he admitted he didn't really know (I wonder how they got the company started) and the customers all presented as some sort of knowledgeable informants. The owner said they were going to switch to regular cane sugar to avoid confusion with high fructose corn syrup – that the “fructose” throws people off and they conflate the two.<sup>24</sup>

Customers knew to inquire about the sugar content but they did not know how to incorporate the information into a larger discourse on food and health.

Interestingly, the producer of the beverage was also confused and unable to provide accurate information about the drink product. It is notable that neither the customers nor the owner seemed to be uncomfortable or irritated by the interaction. The selling script seems predicated on an emphasis on participation rather than comprehension and the very act of engagement appears to assuage some of the insecurity involved in food choice.

The examples in this section are intended to illustrate the vague basis of many sales-driven customer service interactions and the multiplicity of interpretations.

A customer was choosing between two bars of soap and she wanted it for anti-bacterial properties. I looked at both and concluded that Bar A would be best because it listed the concentration of [the ingredients] contained in the soap. Bar B didn't list any ingredients. A supervisor overheard me helping someone, and as I am still new, I asked for

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<sup>24</sup> The beverage now lists “pure cane sugar” as the sweetener in its drinks.

confirmation. The supervisor looked at both bars and concluded that it was actually Bar B that would be best because it listed [antibacterial] in the beginning of its ingredients. Customer bought Bar B. However, it was not a list of ingredients, it was just the blurb about the soap: “[This] is an all-natural soap fortified with blah, blah, blah . . .” I did not contradict the supervisor, as my “knowledge” has already been called into question – how I learned so much so quickly.

When I invited the supervisor into the customer service exchange I relinquished my authority to make a decisive choice for the shopper. Although I disagreed with the supervisor’s conclusion regarding the soap, the consequences were probably minor if even perceptible. What is of more importance is the satisfaction expressed by both the worker and the customer – it was, for all intents and purposes, a successful exchange. There is not an ultimate ideal of the customer service interaction as each dyadic pairing carries with it its own distinctions and preferences.

Another employee, this time at the store where I worked, responded to a different type of customer inquiry.

I overheard a customer ask one of my co-workers why the price of a particular item had gone up. Without really considering the product she replied, “if the price is higher than before, then obviously they raised their prices, so we had to raise ours.” It was just a made up answer, there was no concern for the customer that the price is now much more expensive. The packing slips don’t contain product prices and she isn’t in charge of ordering products so I really don’t think she knew the answer.

Illustrated in the example above is the subtle belief that things really are just the way they are. The coherent linearity of her explanation belies the complicated relations that structure pricing, availability and a clerk’s access to



this information. What is remarkable about the example is her belief in the validity of the response, regardless of the vague nature of the logic.

I also used the selling scripts and found myself saying things such as “this is a lovely bottle of oil” in order to end my interaction with a customer and move on to other exciting activities such as wandering aimlessly around the store. The acceptance of this incredibly vague and meaningless statement is surprising at first, but quickly becomes normalized after hundreds of customers accept it without hesitation. Customers often did not want to know anything about the product; rather they were in search of affirmation of the decision that they had already made. And because they were usually asking about a specific product it was easy just to repeat that it was a good choice. If you detected any hint of doubt in their voice you could easily suggest something else – not always the most expensive but rarely a substantive and informed decision. I found myself suggesting products that others had suggested, regardless of my own experience with them.

Occasionally, product reps would come in to “train” employees about the products so that they can provide customers with more information and, hopefully, make a sale. Over the months I worked in the store I attended about ten training events and received many free samples and products to encourage me to use the products. The customer service exchange based on product inquiry was, therefore, influenced by clerks’ familiarity and, often, bias.

When suppliers and producers gave away free samples in the store, customers performed the role of curious informed shopper by asking

questions, regardless of interest or comprehension or the response. What is of particular note is the role of the employee as an authority figure – here, the apron affords a certain ability (i.e. legitimacy) to communicate information that customers can confidently accept and/or incorporate. Rarely did customers break from the discourse of superficial inquiry but when they did they were often surprised that I could converse fluently with them about (many of) the products. In one particular conversation, we both audibly sighed as we broke from the customer-worker script and chatted as equals.

I repeated what I had been trained to say by my superiors and because I assumed they knew what they were talking about, I hadn't questioned their knowledge and my regurgitation of it. Although the store is known as a quality supermarket, the employees did not appear to be particularly well trained or knowledgeable about the products being sold or the corporate customer service policies. And when they presented as the helpful salesclerk, more often than not they were spouting what I have concluded is mis-information. This awareness was, by far, the most uncomfortable part of my job. I never intentionally misled customers or employees. In the instances I did conclude that the employee was misinterpreting a claim being made on the package or explaining the information incoherently to the customer, I tried to stay out of the interaction as an act of professional courtesy. The customer service interaction would have occurred had I been present or not and, as a researcher, I felt it best to let it occur as naturally as possible. The few times I tried to correct situations it only became more confusing and led to three frustrated people instead of a satisfied social dyad.

## ***Conclusions***

The sheer volume of social interactions was striking and employees, myself included, developed numerous strategies to cope with the relentless exposure. It is the repetitive nature of “doing customer service work” that contributes to the devaluing of the worker and although many customers at the supermarket were polite, the exceptions left indelible impressions, crushed morale, and significantly influenced the socialization of new employees.

Few grocery shoppers admit to enjoying the task and/or doing it for pleasure (see Miller 1998) and even fewer, I posit, would admit to consciously treating thousands of workers poorly. Conversely, no worker wants to admit that she repeatedly subjects herself to being berated by the general public on a regular basis. Unfortunately, the default tone for the customers in the customer service interaction was one of irritation, condescension and indifference. When customers did approach engagement using conversational cues such as “excuse me” or “hello,” employees were much more likely to offer a more engaged level of service.

Unlike the customers of luxury services in Sherman’s (2007) study of high-end hotel workers who preferred customized service and to be called by name, the customers at The Supermarket preferred the ability to move through the customer service encounter anonymously. Although I recognized a few of The Supermarket shoppers as “regulars,” none of the thousands of customers I interacted with while on the shop floor introduced themselves to me by name. Some customers purchased something each week, some asked to sample

products but never purchased, some shared personal stories and greeted me; some ignored me and never appeared to recall interacting with me previously.

It has been suggested that employee alienation is lower when relationships exist with repeated customers rather than a multitude of “encounters” with numerous anonymous customers (Korczynski 2009). The daily toil of interacting with numerous strangers who were socialized to treat retail workers as non-existent was incredibly difficult to deal with and one of the most highly crafted skills of a successful employee. During an official training session, we were told that the people who were promoted within the company were the ones who learned to manage their emotions and not allow customer interactions to jeopardize their sense of self-worth.

The experience on the supermarket shop floor indicates that it is not the repetition or relationship, per se, but the very distinct set of norms that govern interactions based on *expectations* of familiarity or anonymity. As Korczynski (2009) points out, customer service interactions can simultaneously be both a nuisance and a pleasure. In fact, many employees at The Supermarket were visibly excited when particular customers entered the store. Customers known for being polite, interesting to chat with, or even just present in the interaction were appreciated and provided a nice respite from the others who had the potential to cause so much pain.

The impersonality of the mass retailer does have its benefits for the customer. Each customer is assured that she will pay the same price, regardless of the discriminatory attitude of the grocer (see Humphery 1998). By not standing

out, the retail customer is able to demand preferential service while remaining disengaged from the mundane service of grocery shopping and the demands of the social interaction of customer service. The treatment of workers, by the customers, stayed relatively constant – even when the “customer” was a supermarket employee purchasing something after work. The norms of the customer service interchange have been so internalized that a self-reflexivity was rare even when the individual was both the customer and the employee. Otherwise kind, caring and intelligent individuals became rude, dispassionate and disengaged on the supermarket shop floor; the demands of self-preservation on the shop floor inadvertently perpetuating the myth of the ignorant, unskilled, low-wage worker.

Regardless of whether all retail clerks internalize their treatment by the consuming public, it did appear that a large percentage of the consuming public had incorporated this particular form of social inequality into their repertoire. The development of the informal scripts suggests the norms of the customer service interaction: the subordination of the worker to both the customer and the retailer. Break room conversations between workers were often pep talks to help a recently insulted worker gather the fortitude to return to the sales floor. Williams (2006) describes the process of bracing yourself for the customer service interaction and even my most conscientious colleagues are surprised to hear how their seemingly benign behavior structures the treatment of such a large group of workers.

As Leidner (1993) argues, the basis of interactive service work is the work on and of people. The retailer’s work on the employees enabled the employee’s

to do their work on the customers and the customers to do their work on their families (see Miller 1998 and DeVault 1994). The formal standardization of the workers included a dress code (discussed in Chapter Three) as well as the rules governing the use of the body in the customer service interaction (no touching, no hitting, no yelling, etc.). It was, however, the unofficial trainings that provided the most insight into the role of customer service in the reproduction of everyday supermarket life.

Retail workers experience a very real struggle to maintain composure and dignity in a market based system in which they are constantly reminded they are both replaceable and reproducible. This message is both demeaning and false – only a very few master the skills necessary to succeed<sup>25</sup> in the industry. Coping mechanisms such as informal scripts and feigned knowledge allow employees to make it through their workdays, but these tactics also serve to reinforce the status of the retailer. Employees consenting to accept the working conditions as something extrinsic to the process of “producing consumption” structured by the retailer and as something they need to learn to handle, *as individuals*, perpetuates the role of the benevolent retailer.

Newman (1999) argued that the thousands of workers who line-up for jobs that require one able to withstand “character assassination” (p. 93) do so not because they can better tolerate the unkind remarks but because there are few other options for employment. With the boom of big-box retailers over the past decade, the situation has changed slightly: Other jobs may be available but they are similar in nature. Employees would often wax romantic about the

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<sup>25</sup> Success, in this case, could be promotion, but it can understood as maintaining an adequate level of performance to “succeed” in keeping the job, i.e. not getting fired.

benefits of working in one store over another but the one aspect of retail work that stayed constant was the treatment by the customers. The retailer itself might offer a slightly higher wage or seemingly better benefits (or benefits at all) but the demands of the customer service interaction varied little between stores. “Oh, that’s just the way customers are” was a common refrain.

The fast-food workers in Newman’s (1999) study faced a particular stigma that supermarket workers do not experience to the same degree – the lack of grease seems to be the greatest signifier of a more prestigious (low-wage service) job. Although the job revolves around food items, the lack of frying grease, a hot cooking surface, and hairnets make supermarket work appear as a step towards more prestigious white-collar work (see Talwar 2003).

William, one of the participants in Newman’s study was concerned about his peers in the projects finding out he worked at Burger Barn and coming by to hassle him. Both parties knew that William was unable to defend his honor while on the job and could become an easy target for teasing and insults. On the streets, Newman notes, “[n]o small amount of mayhem is committed each year in the name of injured pride” (p. 95). Individuals taunting other individuals resulted in fights and lost friendships. Because of the chasm created between those who had work and those who did not, employees began to spend more and more of their social time together. Friendships amongst the supermarket employees will be discussed in Chapter Eight.

The Supermarket workers I observed were treated much in the same way as the fast-food workers in Newman’s (1999) study. Although The Supermarket employees were not teased by their peers on the shop floor, they were

similarly treated as a subordinate class of humanity by the consuming public. Although there were instances when a particular individual was pointedly rude to a particular employee (many recounted in this chapter) there was a general undercurrent of disrespect and frustration running amongst almost all of the customers.

Almost all demographic characteristics of the store and the workers were dramatically different yet the behavior of the customers towards the employees was remarkably similar, over a decade later. The first few months, for me, were emotionally draining, as I had to quickly learn defense mechanisms in order to deflect the rudeness of the customers away from the construction of my self-image as a worker. Being treated poorly for hours on end, whether one is a graduate student working at a prestigious supermarket or a high-school drop out flipping burgers, is humiliating, debasing and frustrating. Customers, never even giving me the chance to speak, treated me with hostility and often threw their money on the counter despite my open hand, ignored my greetings and questions, and then used a raised voice when speaking to me.

The frustration of workers, Williams (2006) and Tolich (1993) note is exacerbated when there exists a power difference between the two groups. This power difference, for Williams (2006), is premised on membership in a privileged group such as one based on race, class or gender, but I would extend the argument to include situational position. Although it would appear that other demographic characteristics trump occupational status, when examining social inequality, in practice, on the shop floor, position does seem



to trump all others. In the customer-service interaction, the privileged group is absolutely the customers.

No employers explicitly state that they aspire to present disgruntled, unhappy, angry employees as their public image. In fact, their corporate webpages and Annual Reports are full of inspirational language regarding the wellness, pleasure and excitement of the people involved in their business. The image maintenance work that I was able to observe was done more by the employees than by the management/retailer. Being disgruntled, unhappy, and angry was one component of the work and these emotions were discussed (often at length) in the break room, storage areas, and the low trafficked corners of the store. “doing work” as a disgruntled, unhappy, angry employee was something entirely different and few employees in my department appeared, on the front-stage shop floor, to be anything less than fully satisfied.

The significance of the risk that employees internalize their discontent with the job and stick with it despite it being entirely unsatisfying should not be devalued. Low-wage work does not afford employees the luxury of time to look for another, possibly better, job (see Chapter Five for a discussion of wages and schedules). The job at hand is accepted as decent enough and employees become resigned to believing that the seemingly factual “that’s just the way it is” is also the only way it can be, hence, denying the managed exertions required to produce this social reality.

When one customer anecdote or one employee’s experience is contrasted to a billion-dollar corporate food retailer, it is difficult to comprehend the resonance

of the customer service exchange. This comparison, however, is illogical. This chapter has presented numerous examples from an in-depth ethnography of “doing customer service work” in a large, urban supermarket, but more data is needed to continue expanding and explicating our understanding of the role of the customers, the workers and the retail in the reproduction of the social inequality of consumption.

There is no reason to accept the oft-heard refrain that “that’s just the way it is.” As the retail service sector continues to dominate the U.S. economy, it becomes increasingly important to understand the social impact of these broad economic changes. Large corporate retailers continue to consolidate and concentrate and greater numbers of customers will encounter more workers in each store – and vice versa. As customer service exchanges increase in totality (while decreasing in length of each interchange) our attention to this relatively new and unique social interaction must also continue to increase. Although manipulation and exploitation are the modus operandi of the retail industry, as Williams (2006) argues in her study of social inequality in toy retailing, the resulting reification of class, gender and race inequalities are not inevitable.

**CHAPTER EIGHT:**  
**FRIENDSHIPS ON THE SHOP FLOOR –**  
**SOCIALIZATION, SOCIAL NETWORKS AND SURVEILLANCE**

As the previous chapters have discussed, supermarket employees must learn to manage both themselves and others, particularly the customers shopping at the store. This chapter will continue examining the management of others by shifting the analytic gaze to the “other” employees “doing work.” The interactions between employees, whether mediated by management or customers or not, form social networks that shape, and are shaped by, socialization, surveillance and gossip. These “friendships,” as I will refer to them, are instrumental, pleasurable and often both. “Friendly relations” may be a more appropriate semantic expression of these interactions but that phrasing discounts the meaningfulness of the relations, regardless of inability to meet more established definitions of friendship. The employee networks maintained behavioral norms and the in-groups operated, essentially, as the latent outsourcing of social control from the retailer to the employees. A lack of friendships, as I will demonstrate below, can provoke both dissatisfaction with the job and an individual insecurity.

It is through these social interactions that we can see the negotiation of more than the sale of consumer goods that occurs in retail spaces. As private interactions occur between individuals acting not out of economic volition or job satisfaction within an ultimately private corporate space, the binary of public and private becomes inadequate for understanding the role of retail spaces in the reproduction of sociability and society. Low-wage, entry level,

front-line service work in the retail industry is often reduced to a series of rationalized procedures that supposedly allow interchangeable employees to equally complete tasks. These assumptions have been discounted in previous chapters and I continue arguing the complexity of “doing retail work” by illustrating in this chapter the importance and relevance of others in the individual pretense of managing the self and others.

The social networks and friendships described that are brought in from the employee’s “private” spheres (see also Pettinger 2005b) are inherently bound and structured by the limits of the workplace – the social interactions occur because the individuals are hired by the corporation to be present within the store at certain times and in certain ways.<sup>26</sup> These informal components of “doing work” are also sanctioned by the retailer for their positive (see the overtime example below) and negative (see the cake example below) merits depending on the contribution to the overall corporate structure (profit, efficiency, etc.). This reach of the corporation into the sublimely personal, personality and relationships, illustrates something too often obscured by a focus on wages, benefits and other concrete materialities of the labor market. Paychecks are not the only things employees take home/out of the store, they also take with a sense of belonging or longing, an uplifted or frustrated attitude, and a larger ethic of work and sociability.

Although often distraught and sometimes angry or unhappy about their jobs, my co-workers took their employment status seriously and the friendships that they pursued while at work provided meaning and value in an otherwise

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<sup>26</sup> Friendship networks have also been shown to influence hiring networks (see Pettinger 2005b) although evidence from the shop floor at The Supermarket indicated otherwise.

anonymous and sterile environment. The emotional attachment to a job and “doing work” is better understood when analyzed as the process of developing and maintaining group memberships. When employees consent to participate in “doing work,” even when overworked and underpaid, they are again allowing the retailer to maintain its position as a legitimate authority figure. By reproducing the border between the largest in-group/out-group divide of employee/non-employee, “doing work” embeds the employee in one group while sharpening the boundaries with the others. A significant contradiction of low-wage corporate retail work is that although the work itself may be inherently undesirable (debasing, physically strenuous, long hours, low pay), the other people working are sharing those same tasks as comrades and are often kind, interesting, honest individuals one desires to interact and form bonds with. This tension between the individual and the corporation is expressed at many levels. Individuals needing a way to earn an income welcome the job offered by the bureaucratic corporation. And by having competent, kind and intelligent management in place the employee feels like a part of something more intimate than a profit-seeking corporate entity.

### ***Socialization***

As discussed previously, employees at The Supermarket are hired on a trial basis and can be “let go” at any time, for any reason, during this period. The other shop floor clerks’ opinions are solicited before an official transfer to permanent status as an employee and I was nervous about the process while it was happening, despite being assured by a manager that no one had been denied employment because of negative comments. The passage below reflects my reaction to this situation, and others’ reactions to me:

I was chastised [by a co-worker] for how quickly I progressed from temporary worker to being a legitimate employee. One of the managers from another department actually said, “You got [hired] really quickly! Usually it takes way longer, but I guess they must have really wanted you . . . hmrf, I thought that you had to finish [training] first, but I guess your department doesn’t have to follow those rules.”

The comment regarding my transition to a full-fledged employee, delivered with a smile and an acutely felt sting, worked to solidify my new status in two ways. First, it served to remind me that although I had been officially hired I had not yet been accepted as a legitimate member of the informal social network of employees. Second, it acted as boundary work separating “my” department from others in the store. As within many organizations there was a hierarchical arrangement of departments within the store. Front-end cashiers were seen as the lowest and worst positions and although the workers were treated well by their colleagues, the position held the lowest overall status. One front-end cashier transferred to housekeeping and claimed he would rather clean toilets and trashcans than work another day at the main registers. My department fell somewhere in the upper-middle class: not as prestigious as office work that was done off of the shop-floor yet seen as “privileged” because of our relative freedom of movement and understanding manager. Movement within departments was seen as upward (or downward) mobility and involuntary transfers were used to shame employees just as requested transfers approved as a form of reward.

The participation in the hiring process allows employees to feel like that they can influence their work environment, but it is essentially the retailer relying on the free maintenance work of the employees to choose others like them to work with. Those who stood out or were innovators were socialized to fit in or

risked being ostracized by their co-workers. In order to maintain the status quo, employees are allowed to choose who should remain a part of their workforce.

### ***Social networks***

Acclimating to the social scene of The Supermarket took a few months, although I did begin to feel more relaxed at work after a few weeks. During the first few days and weeks I found myself anxious about fitting in and being liked. I was not only physically exhausted while learning to stand up all day, I was also mentally exhausted from, as Goffman (1959) would say, spending my entire workday on the front-stage. By the end of my tenure, I had become completely comfortable with every aspect of “doing retail work” and, as discussed in the methods section, experienced saturation in my research.

The passage below describes the contradiction of retail work mentioned above. These jobs, and the complexities of “doing work,” have many forms of rewards that should not be overlooked or discredited in studies of work and consumption, particularly because of the dominance of the retail sector in modern U.S. society. The passage also illustrates how the decrease in primary social ties between the employees and other members of their immediate social worlds reinforces feelings of alienation. This loss of self keeps them in their retail jobs and inhibits their desires to leave to pursue something else as they would be walking away from all of the social networks they have in their lives. The importance of being liked should not be underestimated and the following passage illustrates the complexity of managing both the long hours

and demanding work of being a supermarket employee and social relationships outside of the store.

[This] has to become something more than just a job, because if that is all it was, everyone would be miserable – the hourly wage, the long hours, and the crappy retail schedule would get you down. Having friends means you aren't alone, you have company and someone to share your experiences with. I am surprised at how many employees comment about not really having friends outside of work. Carrie has made the comment that she hasn't really made friends since moving here. Vivian has mentioned she doesn't really have friends. Lana was unhappy in her marriage and seemed to talk a lot with other workers. Barbara is dating [someone, but says] they don't have any friends.

A consistent schedule can allow for more than consistent wages. The predictability of who will be at work, when, can allow workers to form bonds and relationships with others. Work at The Supermarket, however, with the fluctuating and varying shifts, seemed to preclude workers from having stable friendships with those in more traditional and predictable work formats (such as 9-5 weekday positions). The limiting of potential friendship networks to other retail workers or those working comparable schedules made connections even more difficult to establish. The “structure of work” provides a structure for life and having a community of the “fellow stigmatized” (Newman 1999:104) allows workers to find and make meaning in a situation that is devoid of positive social interaction.

By the time I would get to the break room I was often too tired or overwhelmed to engage with my co-workers. Our shifts were so inconsistent that I rarely saw the same people twice and the energy to constantly meet new people was often lacking. Although The Supermarket workers had a better popular image than fast-food workers (no grease, no hair nets, no flipping burgers) the work



is equally demanding, relentless and unappreciated by the majority of customers. The frustration of subordinating the scheduling of leisure time around work time was best understood by others in similar positions (as it was for the Burger Barn employees in Newman's 1999 study).

The somewhat captive audience for interaction while at work allowed many employees their only unfettered moments of socializing. The friendships and romantic relationships established on the shop floor provided not only connections to a larger social world but also a reminder of the world outside of the actual supermarket. Having someone to talk to, to enjoy seeing at work, makes the time more pleasant and pass more quickly (see Fisher 1993). Not all employees were equally able to maintain friendships and extended social networks within the store. Personality variations mixed with temperament, age, interests and communication styles, all of which inhibited everyone from forming a cohesive, equally extended network. Alienated employees, those unable to integrate into the social fabric, often left our department through an involuntary transfer or by quitting. One co-worker, Barbara, had a particularly difficult time settling into the social fabric.

Barbara has almost given up. Her temper and her odd interaction skills are going to get her fired, or at least transferred, but she seems incapable of doing anything to change her behavior and she is very upset. Her coping skills are not very developed, and I wonder if it is way too much speculation to think that her lack of friendships has something to do with it. She started our day by announcing that no one in her household was speaking to her anymore [ . . . ] She announced this while we were behind the counter helping customers. It felt inappropriate, and I had no idea how to react. We discussed it briefly, but then I was trying to focus on my customer and really didn't want to get into it with her.

The above passage is not presented to suggest that Barbara, herself, was at fault for her feelings of alienation. The management of the self, as discussed previously, is a complex skill honed through education and experience.

“Success” in self-management did seem to vary between co-workers and the most obvious determinant was one’s ability to develop and maintain ties to multiple social networks. These proved almost more important than job proficiency.

Some employees made such strong connections with co-workers that they visited friends in the store after their shifts or on their days off, like the fast-food employees at Burger Barn (Newman 1999) and the retail workers at the toy store (Williams 2006). A few co-workers were dating someone within the company, although corporate restrictions prohibited dating someone within the same department.

I got along with everyone in my department, although there were a few tense moments when I got very angry and irritated by co-workers. My field notes read, in hindsight, as gauges of my mood at work. Days were I was able to make more detailed observations were days that I found pleasant to work, meaning days that I was scheduled to work with people I enjoyed being around. Not necessarily hard workers or great conversationalists, they were people that I enjoyed knowing as people. On the days that I worked with them, the hours passed quickly, the work seemed engaging, the customers were tolerable and I could imagine the possibilities for promotion and continuation with the company. On days when I worked with people I found irritating, slow workers, or otherwise completely disengaged, the hours dragged on, the day

itself felt like a vague semblance of itself, and life in general felt tedious and overwhelming. I couldn't imagine that things would ever engage my intellectual curiosity or stimulate my senses again.

My outlook fluctuated with much more than the shifts I worked each week, but the numerous comments in my notes about friendships and camaraderie at work score the point – the retail job is much more than the series of individual tasks expected to be completed. It is more than the engagement with goods or showing up on time. The ability to withstand the pressures of interactive service work is partially dependent on the other people working in the department. It should also be noted that the high turnover and flexible scheduling also contribute to the long-term effect of working retail. Even if employment seems ominous on one day, the next may be totally different. And even if a week of awful shifts and experiences at work, it is the possibility that the next day may be different that keeps people returning to jobs that are unfulfilling, unsatisfying, and as I argue elsewhere potentially damaging to the larger social good.

I met a few new employees during orientation and we would greet each other every time we ran into each other, which was not often. We would compare basic notes about work – how is your boss, are you getting scheduled enough, etc. and be on our way, each rushing to maximize the minimal break time allotted to us. The structure of the position directly influenced the construction of my social network. There were few places where employees would randomly meet – the stairs leading from the sales floor to the basement, the break room in the basement, or sometimes a quick hello as you passed each

other at one of the employee bathrooms – so I met a particular set of people, mainly colleagues in my department and those whose breaks coincided with mine.

The break room cliques are still frustrating, and I have found most people uninterested in speaking to each other. In some ways it makes sense – it is incredibly difficult to get a snack eaten in 15 minutes, and if you count the time it takes you to walk to the break room and back, it is probably only about twelve minutes of break time. You really have to just scarf food down. And on a 30, everyone is just so tired, they are disinterested in everything. [ . . . I] can hear [people] (though they are mostly speaking Spanish and I can't understand a lot of it) talking to people on their cell phones, and since cells aren't allowed on the floor, it must be someone outside of the store.

Camaraderie amongst team members was occasionally encouraged by management as well. One afternoon, the entire staff of my department was taken out for a social outing and dinner at the company's expense. The day was pleasant enough, as awkward as any social event is with people you don't particularly know well. The larger question of whether it encouraged cohesion and cooperation amongst the employees is more difficult to answer. The event allowed us to move at our own pace and interact with who we chose and the cliques from the shop-floor replicated themselves over dinner. The employees who already felt the most at-risk of losing their jobs (poor performance, bad attitude, missing too many work days) kept to themselves and the more established employees acted as the un-appointed social directors. Management often kept a distance from engaging in the formation and maintenance of the social networks/cliques but occasionally stepped in to mitigate if things appeared to be getting too insular, as the example below suggests:

[Carrie] has announced [her birthday] to anyone who will listen. Veronica gave Annie a b-day cake because she was working on her b-day and Carrie was very excited about getting her cake as well when the time comes. [ . . . ] Veronica collected some cash and then asked one of our managers if she could take me with her to pick out the cake. We stopped by Susan's office and she was very resistant to our idea. She had a good point – what if we missed someone's birthday? Were we really prepared to do this for everyone's birthday? What if someone's feelings got hurt and we didn't even know it . . . didn't want to start any ill will on the group, and between employees. Not sure if she was thinking of a specific incident that could occur, or just that maybe some of us were cliquing in ways that others weren't?

Fluidity occurred among the groups as Carrie, Veronica and I were not always part of the same clique. Over the span of the time I spent on The Supermarket shop floor the boundaries of the in-groups melded, solidified, diversified and softened. Upper management presented a sense of a unified employee group and during store meetings we received pep talks and prizes in order to boost morale. The most manufactured and strictly maintained group boundary was between The Supermarket management and the shop floor staff. Although the corporate lingo of inclusiveness was used to stimulate employees to self-subordinate, the hierarchy within The Supermarket, in general and within our department in particular, was sharply maintained.

My particular job afforded me the relative luxury of freedom of movement and allowed me to choose when and how to interact with co-workers in other departments. If I did not want to chat with the meat department, I avoided walking past the meat counter. If I wanted to chit chat with my colleagues at the coffee counter I would purchase something to drink during a break.

The social isolation that resulted from my freedom of movement allowed me to remain further on the fringes of the group than I may have been in another department. Although I could choose how social to be with my co-workers, they also played an integral role in shaping our relationship. I did not realize how ingrained a member of the department I had become until my last day of work when my department threw me a going away party. I was incredibly touched by their generosity of spirit and their acceptance of me into their social world. Since leaving the job, I often pass the store and occasionally stop in to get the latest update on births, weddings, graduations, promotions and other life events.

### ***Gossip***

One of the ways in which group boundaries were made manifest and maintained was through the use of gossip. A tool for the spread of information, gossip among groups of co-workers was used to incorporate some people while excluding others. It was not always that one individual was being gossiped about, often it was the inclusion of some but not all in the sharing of the information, no matter how benign.

My field notes were full of bits of gossip about co-workers; some I was recording based on my own observations but most was told to me by colleagues. I found myself inadvertently entangled in networks of gossip very early on. Sometimes it was because the person telling me the information wanted to share it with *me* but more often it was because I happened to be standing nearby and would listen to what someone wanted to say.

I found out yesterday, through Lana, that Barbara has been written up a couple of times already. Lana was worried because Barbara was late to work and she thought maybe that would cause a problem for Barbara. She didn't find out that the trains weren't running and that she didn't know how to get to work from the stop she got out at.

The information about Barbara's lateness seems, at first, innocuous. It does, however, serve a purpose. First, it reiterates one of the largest demands of retail work: you must physically be present at your scheduled shifts. Seemingly obvious that you must be in attendance to earn wages – think again about paid sick days and the recent proliferation of jobs that can be done from remote locations. Barbara did not have the luxury of taking an *unpaid* sick day or working from home; she was being paid to be present in the store with an almost blatant disregard for what work she actually did when there. Second, it is presented as a morality tale that those who are late get in trouble. I was first told about the importance of being on time during an official training by someone being paid to provide information yet the reminders and enforcement were provided by employees with no particular authority to govern my actions. The message was clear, however, that even if the managers did not realize that Barbara was late, Lana did.

Maintaining the delicate balance of neither upsetting nor favoring co-workers required a level of effort unforeseen, yet was an integral part of “doing work” on The Supermarket shop floor. My personal feelings towards co-workers had to be disregarded yet I could not manage other's perceptions of me, whether fairly or accurately designated. I seemed to “naturally” get along with some employees better than others and this frustrated some of my co-workers who may have had a greater interest in befriending me than I felt towards them. My

frustration with this situation is expressed in the passage below. It also suggests that ostracizing someone from your social network might work against you by alienating someone who could, in the future, potentially do you a favor if you needed to switch shifts.

[T]he thought of getting stuck in between Whitney and Roberta at our meeting is enough to make me not want to go, but then trying to hang out with the people whose company I would enjoy is certainly going to piss off certain people and solidify a “clique.” Although we are almost all in our 20s and 30s, people act like immature high school children fighting over their favorite toys. People’s feelings get hurt, people get passive aggressive, they gossip, etc. [ . . . ] but it seems that if you really wanted to be in control of your schedule, you would need the support of the other employees so that they will switch shifts with you. It is much easier to say no to someone you dislike; and much more difficult to someone who has become a “friend.”

One of my co-workers had a difficult time getting her desired schedule and it may have been because of her prolific gossiping. I was, to my knowledge, always on the receiving end of her gossip rather than a target and although I strictly controlled the information available about me, I could not, of course, control how others conveyed their own observations and opinions of me. I learned the most about our benefits, the store policies, and how to manage myself from her, yet she had one of the most divisive personalities of the group. She and I worked easily together and I found her competent, capable and pleasant. She rarely made mistakes and could stock shelves, face product and help customers more accurately and quickly than anyone else in the department. But it was clear that not all of my co-workers shared my opinion of her and this small detail shaped their perceptions of me – if I could tolerate, and even enjoy, working with Carrie, could they tolerate me? More importantly, her gossiping and contentious social network also seemed to shape her career



trajectory. Desperate to move off up from her position she was often hurt when co-workers in the store were promoted to positions she felt she was better qualified for.

Despite the effort I exerted to remain impartial, I did find that the need to befriend others overpowered by ability to stay objective at times:

I have found myself in a clique. I didn't try, I didn't see it happening, but it did. I suppose I knew that I was becoming chatty with Carrie, but I didn't expect the petty passive-aggressive behavior from Vivian [ . . . ] She has been moping around work lately and I think it is partly because she is jealous that Carrie and I joke around. But the strangest thing is that Josh has taken a new liking to me. We have also worked together more and he has seen me interact with customers more and I think he appreciates my ability to deal with them without getting frustrated (Whitney) or mad (Barbara). Someone gave Whitney some money, but she entered it incorrectly in the register and it screwed her up for at least 5 minutes. I didn't feel it was my place to butt in, and I tried to point it out to someone (maybe Josh), but people were too busy with their own gossip, or just didn't care. He has been wanting to chat more, or more correctly, talk at me more. He still doesn't listen very well.

Regardless of my own levels of objectivity, others reacted to me in a variety of ways as evidenced in the passage above. Some co-workers were neither glad nor upset to see me when I turned up for a shift. A few were actually pleased by my presence and a few were distinctly irritated by it. Like any social network of friends, we had a variety of attitudes towards one another. The major difference is that we were being paid to be in one another's presence (with the notable exception of employees who came in on their days off) and that the schedule was largely out of our hands. I did not hear any stories of people requesting to work only with certain others.

### ***Gossip as surveillance***

Surveillance, in the form of co-worker gossip, plays a large role in the structuring of the retail workplace. New trade regulations have allowed for access to cheaper land and labor in food production in other places (McMichael and Friedmann 2007), yet most retailing work is site specific and cannot be sourced from countries with lower wages and costs. Gossip, however, can be similarly understood as a way of outsourcing the work of a (relatively expensive) human resources manager to the (relatively low-wage) shop floor workers. In the field note excerpt below, I express my dismay at the portended “bonus” that we might receive if we effectively manage our co-workers’ behavior.

Johnny believes in the primacy of the company and thinks we are in a fair position, and that it is our duty as employees, to help the company earn more profits. In return for our efforts, he assures us, we may be eligible to receive [ . . . ] bonuses [ . . . Our] best chances at getting one is to make sure no one in the department is working overtime and eating up our labor budget.

The bonus appears, at first glance, to be a generous offer: work hard, help the store make more money and the company will reward you with a share of the profit.

A complicated mathematical equation configured the difference between labor budgets and actual spending and distributed a percentage of any overage to workers in the respective department. The underlying premise was that being physically present for a shift could jeopardize these bonuses and that relinquishing your predictable shifts for the greater good of the department was encouraged. The month after my team earned a substantial bonus, our

labor costs were cut so that we were operating on a tighter budget making it less likely that we would earn the same bonus the next month. In fact, we never again received a substantial bonus. Despite promises of high monthly bonuses that would supplement our low hourly wages, corporate changes to our staffing budget significantly impacted this from happening. Our department manager was clear about cuts to the staffing budget as it shifted the number of employees working each shift, and therefore our experience on the sales floor.<sup>27</sup>

The “bottom-line mentality” of the bonuses is concurrent with retail trends (Barndt 2002) and Leidner (1993) found “the costs of uneven demand [fluctuating customer flow] are shifted to the workers whenever possible” (p. 83) and this seemed to also be the case at The Supermarket. The surveillance by co-workers encouraged The Supermarket shop floor co-workers to sacrifice a tangible personal gain (working overtime) for the possibility of earning a group benefit (the bonus). Overtime, a significant benefit for the individual employee, is costly for the corporation because it requires paying time and a half. Similarly, on holidays when employees were also to be paid time and a half, only the newest, and cheapest, employees were scheduled to work.

Employee-led surveillance was also used to keep the break schedule running on time. Breaks were scheduled in fifteen-minute intervals and rarely overlapped because you were not allowed to take your break until the person

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<sup>27</sup> Managers in Barndt’s (2002) study of Loblaw’s, a Canadian supermarket chain, were rewarded for keeping their department’s labor hours low though it was not clear this was the case at The Supermarket. Hypothetically, The Supermarket managers would then be in the position of choosing between a personal or a group reward, an interesting ethical and political conundrum.

ahead of you had returned. You were not clocking in/out for your break but since there was someone waiting for you to return your timelines, or lack of it, was noticed. There were particular employees notorious for extra long breaks, but since they were in higher positions, the lower level shop floor employees were ultimately powerless to do anything official, although we often discussed it amongst ourselves. The Supermarket shop floor workers scolded each other for missing breaks or forgetting to alert each other when they returned because it, inevitably, threw off the department's break schedule. Looking at the staggered breaks from a management perspective, it makes sense in the context of running a large bureaucratic organization. But it ceases to make sense when we look at the potential repercussions of the exercised control over the minutiae of everyday employee life and employees learned to manage their own behavior *within* the context of the expectations set for them by management and co-workers.

Sherman (2007) found that the luxury hotel workers she observed also took on managerial duties such as training and socialization and that workers would self regulate when there was little interference from management. The luxury hotel staff (cleaning persons, bell boys, concierge workers) would do this by competing for tips from customers (often physically barring their competition from access to the customer) and a parallel can be seen in some of the tactics engaged by The Supermarket workers such as claiming carts as "in use"<sup>28</sup> overnight, therefore denying the use by a co-worker. The politics of overriding

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<sup>28</sup> Workers would leave carts full of products and then place handwritten note on top that read "IN USE" thereby claiming the cart as their own and denying its usage to co-workers in the department. Often, the nicest carts were claimed (clean surfaces, aligned wheels, etc.) and employees had to choose between ignoring the sign and unloading the cart or using a dirty, broken cart to complete their own work.

a tagged cart was based mainly on the social hierarchy and little to do with seniority or actual job title.

### ***Conclusions***

When “doing retail work,” maintaining social ties and friendships becomes an integral part of the job. Shop floor clerks were required to master the explicitly stated goals of the corporation such as being on time for work and doing tasks appropriately but there was an implicit expectation for workers to become a part of a social network larger than the individual. As this chapter has discussed, “doing work,” for the employee, is about more than the mastery of the skills required by the retailer to be considered a competent worker. Co-workers appeared to be each others’ toughest critics and the inclusion in the social network of shop floor clerks the ultimate marker of success.

Pettinger (2005b) suggests that friendships amongst sales staff may lead to a more “socially cohesive and homogeneous shop floor” (p. 41) but the united brand representation she found in her study of retail clothing stores was not apparent at The Supermarket. Employees in Pettinger’s (2005b) study commented on having fun on the shop floor to convey a sense of fun to the customers. Although my supermarket colleagues and I did sometimes have an enjoyable time at work, there was neither a corporate ethos that we were encouraged to exhibit nor a discussion of a communal “feel.”

Unlike the retail workers in Pettinger’s (2005b) study, The Supermarket workers in this study rarely socialized with one another outside of the workplace. Of those who did engage in social relations with co-workers

outside of working hours, the majority were in either romantic or familial relationships. However, one friendship pair met on the shop floor and quickly became very close; they shared intimate details of their personal lives with each other (and often anyone else standing within earshot). Their relationship seemed to provide each of them with a much needed friend and confidant.

None of my colleagues appeared to be intentionally misleading or ingenuous about their affection and animosity. The secondary economy of the exchange of emotions amongst workers must be understood as an inherent part of “doing work” rather than something mutually exclusive. As Pettinger (2005b) argues, “sociability itself may be a form of labour” (p. 50). Reductionist views of work and consumption disable, rather than enable, an understanding of modern consumer capitalism.

Friendships amongst fast-food workers (Newman 1999) created a workplace culture that reinforced the value of the work ethic. Employees in her study slowly began distancing themselves from neighborhood friends while building stronger ties to co-workers who understood and reaffirmed their decision to “flip burgers.” This need for an authoritative valuing of one’s decision to work should not be read as the blind consent of the working conditions as acceptable. On the contrary, the friendships at Burger Barn and the friendships at The Supermarket both enabled employees to gain authoritative affirmation from a non-corporate source about “doing retail work.”

Groups of co-workers are ultimately groups of people and this chapter has presented some of the complexities involved in the management of others.

Although there were employees who never encountered one another over the tenure of their employment, there did exist a level of predictability regarding who you might be expected to engage with while “doing work.” The general level of animosity towards customers was not mirrored in workers’ feelings towards one another. Although cliques formed and feelings got hurt, workers, in general, respected each other and took notice when a colleague was having a rough time. No one was actively and entirely despised and this may have something to do with the hiring skills of our department manager who was able to construct a group of individuals who would work, at least decently well, with one another. The repercussions of the energy involved in the management of others have, unfortunately, been largely overlooked. Corporate retailers continue to focus on prices, wages and profits at the expense of human welfare in the form of social needs.

What is particularly interesting about the role of social networks within The Supermarket is the previous lack of attention to *people* within the distribution process of the food system. When the workers and the process of “doing work” are incorporated into our understanding of the contemporary food system, we must not overlook the practice of the reproduction of the self and the role that social networks plays in that. Workers are treated as replaceable, interchangeable and often anonymous corporate representatives but as this chapter has illustrated, they are inherently and completely human, including the need for social interaction and the joys and frustrations that accompany being a part (or not) of a social network.

## CHAPTER NINE: CONCLUSIONS

### ***“Producing consumption”***

As I have illustrated in this dissertation, the analysis of the lived experiences of working in a supermarket enables a better understanding of the practices and processes involved in “producing consumption” in the food system. By including retail in theories of consumption, supermarkets in theories of the food system and workers in theories of both, the nuanced relationships between consumers, retailers and workers are illuminated.

The historical overview of the rise of the supermarket superpowers helps contextualize food retailing corporations within late capitalism in the U.S. The evidence gathered from The Supermarket shop floor illustrates how retailers use their position as gatekeepers of the food and nutrition system to exert considerable control over the stocking and staffing of the store. Furthermore, by bounding the sphere in which workers “do work,” large corporate retailers are able to significantly influence the workers’ freedom to manage themselves and others. Finally, the incorporation of retailing, supermarkets and workers into theories of consumption and agri-food systems has produced a more nuanced argument about the movement of food throughout the food system.

When customers enter a supermarket ready to vote for a food system with their food dollars, they are participating in an election that has been run, staffed and supplied by the retailer. The items available on The Supermarket’s shelves had to travel a long, circuitous path to reach customers – often it was



not the quality, per se, of any item that preserved its existence but, rather, the volume of sales. As choices become restricted to those selling well, the “candidates” available for election are those privileged by their economic relations. The “buyers” for The Supermarket are specific to the particular store and this does allow a modicum of diversity, even between stores in the same locale, but they are choosing products from a list edited by the upper-level regional and national retail buyers. While I was working at The Supermarket, a product was pulled off of the shelves because although it was selling well at the store level, the regional (and/or national, it was not clear) retail buyers had terminated the relationship with the manufacturer. The ability for producers to sell in such high-volume quantities, as is the basis of the original supermarket strategy, limits the availability of goods to those with a particular economic fortitude. The question then becomes one of authenticity and cultural capital – do mass produced items lose a sense of the genuine? At what scale? What can be gained/lost from a food system premised on sales, rather than quality or experience? Though these questions are beyond the scope of the dissertation, it is important to return to this discussion of the machinations of the larger, U.S. and global, food system.

The analysis of the hiring process illuminated an equally structured culling of variety, although with a more functional decree. Food retailing, despite a high level of profit overall, has a low profit *margin* and one of the largest operating costs is labor. By lowering the costs associated both with hiring and turnover, retailers argue they continue to offer foods at low prices – although the extension of any savings to customers has been challenged (Clarke 2000). The highly rationalized hiring process allows for a certain ease when large

retailers are faced with thousands of applications. The benefit for the workers is not as immediate, and as I have argued in this dissertation, the ability to construct a diverse workforce is inhibited by the imposed standards. Reducing applicants to the results of a poorly worded personality assessment overlooks actual qualities such as drive, desire and, most important, experience. The process of acquiring a job at The Supermarket provided evidence that contradicts the assertion that low-wage workers are equally reproducible and replaceable by revealing the hindrances to these jobs that keep many workers from having the opportunity of employment. The question then becomes one of segregation and social inequality, essentially the comparison of individual desire (I want to work) within a corporate controlled labor market. In late capitalist societies dependent on consuming, wages become necessary not only for subsistence but also identity. As potential workers are denied access to the jobs that provide these wages, how does this structure a larger social inequality?

Once acquired, jobs at The Supermarket required a subjugation of the self to the supermarket and in order to “do work,” employees had to learn to manage both their selves and others. The most intimate aspect of managing the self is the mastery of the physical demands of “doing work.” The body is more than a happenstance of these positions yet it is often obscured by the materialities such as wages and benefits. The impact of the long hours and exertion coupled with the retailer’s ability to control even the most minute details of self-presentation, create a working environment that looks relaxed but is experienced as totalizing. The relative benefits of working at The Supermarket versus other food retailers did not go unnoticed by the employees yet they do

not indicate only a relative level of freedom of expression and corporeal protection rather than an absolute level of fulfillment. All workplaces have governances regarding personal behavior and the retailer's rules are, in theory, not exceptional. What has been taken for granted in the ubiquity of the exertion of corporate control is the limiting aspect of the demands: only particular workers can excel under these circumstances and because there are more workers than jobs, the retailer can continue to restrict employment to a workforce that consents to its conditions.

The mental demands of low-wage interactive service work further illustrate the specificity of retail jobs and contradict the expectation that the jobs are low-skill as well. Successful workers at The Supermarkets were the ones that were able to master both physically withstanding the demands of retail work and the process of learning. Employees with experience learning, developed in education or previous retail jobs, performed better and felt less frustration on the shop floor. It was experience, not necessarily intelligence, that allowed employees to have a greater control over their own actions and the comfort that accompanied feelings of mental acuity eased the discomfort of challenging interactions at the cash register. The seemingly inefficient training process illustrates a further outsourcing of labor, although in this case it is being transferred to a lower-paid employee (training manager to co-worker) rather than out of the system itself.

The socialization process requires an engaged level of awareness from the employee. The role that friendship networks played was discussed in a separate chapter, yet the process of fitting in also contributed to the tenor of

the worker ideology and the acceptance of personal responsibility for properly integrating into the rationalized bureaucratic nature of The Supermarket. The most trying aspect of “doing retail work” is the management of boredom. Interactive service work demands workers to be consistently engaged with the job and rather than stimulating, the repetitive and relentless aspect of work, forced many workers to deal with overwhelming feelings of boredom on the shop floor. The main technique for dealing with boredom on the shop floor was to disengage as entirely as possible from stimulation. This dampening of the stimuli experienced is one of the main reasons for worker acceptance of, and demand for, these jobs and their dulled senses were not enraged (to the point of action) by working conditions. The question then becomes one of ethics – when the labor market is evaluated and guidelines developed governing appropriate tasks for “workers” whose standards are being used? The retailer benefited from the acquiescing workforce and the highly rationalized tasks were completed *enough*, although rarely efficiently or correctly. The risk is to the workers and the result is that although they may have access to the same social and cultural capital, in theory, there exists a discrepancy in how they access these resources in practice.

Dealing with the general consuming public is one of the most challenging aspects of interactive service work. The blatant disregard portrayed, by customers and employees alike, towards workers’ selves (physical and mental) coupled with generations of poor working conditions are taking their toll on not only the millions of supermarket workers but also the hundreds of millions of customers. The examination of the social, rather than economic, relation between worker and customer highlighted the disparity between these

two groups. The anonymity promised by the consumerist society does not translate into the experience of “producing consumption.” In the cultural ideology of consumerism, the privileging of the customers’ search for the satisfaction of consuming desires devalues workers.

The theoretical conceptualization of the workers has been largely overlooked within consumption and they have been rendered mostly invisible. The development of informal scripts as a coping mechanism to deal with the persistence of consumers allowed the workers to portray a level of control over a social interaction in which they were assumed subordinate. The efficiency of scripts facilitated the management of interactions with thousands of customers each day. Similarly, the structuring of the workers’ script enabled them to exert control over interactions by denying variation and imposing homogeneity on the interaction. The infuriation of the customers was then not felt as harshly as a personal disappoint or lack of character because of the dulled senses cultivated through the skilled aversion to boredom.

Customer service is the interaction between people, yet the evidence from the shop floor suggests that neither workers nor customers are treating each other humanely and developing lasting associations with others. The experience of working on the shop floor could be further dignified through the incorporation of the social and sociability aspects of the workers “doing work” in the retail sector. The retailer emerges from the customer service interaction as the benevolent provider protecting both the rights of the customer and the working conditions of the employees while, in actuality, accomplishing neither. The Supermarket, in the guise of guardian but reality of gatekeeper, provided the

platform for these social interactions (the shop floor) as well as the job training that encouraged deferential employee behavior.

The Supermarket employees developed networks of friends and co-workers that provided meaningful and strategic social interactions on the shop floor. The presence of others provided distraction from often insulting customers and long shifts passed more quickly when experienced with pleasant interactions with favorable co-workers. The cultivation of friendship networks appears frivolous at first glance but when analyzed further, the networks of co-worker relations served two main purposes. The first, described above, provided meaningful interactions for employees throughout the day and countered the negativity often experienced during interactions with customers. The second repercussion of employee networks further benefits the retailer; the exertion of network governance in the form of gossip and surveillance provided employee oversight and created a compliant shop floor workforce. The folklore of better jobs (that lacked customer interaction) spread concurrently with the stories of worse jobs and both tales quelled the resistance of the workforce. It further provided a reminder that a better job was the result of personal determination and solidified the responsibility for job satisfaction as a personal one. The folklore of worse jobs suggested a satisfaction with the (relatively better) job at hand and provided a theoretical reward for the employee's impetus and job choice. Workers experience far more than the details of their positions when they do work on a supermarket shop floor. This research on the friendship networks of employees suggests that we continue to examine the breadth of the reach of food retailers as they extend their influence beyond the

supermarket walls into the lives, expectations and ideologies of their employees.

There is a particular sting to being treated poorly in front of others, particular by an institution. Interactions felt to be disrespectful, like hurtful arguments between friends or lovers, may leave a sting on the parties involved; the constant and totalizing treatment of a worker by the employer influences a far wider berth of the socialization process. The severe angle of the rise to the top of the employment pyramid illustrates the vast distance between management and shop floor workers. Although a few managers once worked on the shop floor, evidence of a positive benefit of this situation was rarely seen.

The refrain, “well, that’s just how it is” may provide security for millions of workers that the situation they are so disgruntled by is not particular to them. In a perverse twist of C. Wright Mills’ work, it is the ultimate affirmation that “doing work” in the retail sector is a societal issue, not a personal problem. The benefit of this statement is certainly also felt by the retailer. The positive attributes that emerge from the fellowship of the stigmatized reinforce the retailer as the omnipotent being that exists because of the labor of the workers yet is untouchable because of the structure of the relationship that separates the workers from the reality of the “producing consumption.”

### ***A note on consent at The Supermarket***

Workers at The Supermarket were socialized, subtly and overtly, from the onset of their interest in a position, to consent to the working conditions of the store. Only in analysis did the seemingly obvious indicators emerge; as

experienced, they appeared as natural components of the job and were accepted as such, as illustrated in this study. The distinction between consent and coercion, in this case, is that in a consenting relationship the employee voluntarily agrees to and accepts the premise for work in a market in which there are alternatives. Consenting employees are, in essence, agreeing to not only the job itself, but also the larger array of working conditions in the retail sector. Coercion, on the other hand, would involve the use of real or threatened force to extract compliance. The context in which employees provide their consent must be questioned, as well as the role of the retailer as an influencing, and structuring, factor in the “decision” making process (see Burawoy 1979).

The widely used postmodern perspective about consumption suggests a re-imagining of consumers as active participants rather than dupes and the analysis of workers “doing work” should include the actions, not only the reactions, of employees in the reproduction of labor. The importance of context is equally important when considering the tensions between consent and coercion and the structure of The Supermarket encouraged, enabled, and almost verged on insisting on the consent of its workers. The importance of the analysis of consent is that it is important to understand how work is done, in this case how consent is proffered, rather than why it is not done (resisted).

The application process seems to cater to the needs of the individual by making the process both flexible and adaptive and employed job applicants were, therefore, able to complete the application at their leisure, rather than conform to the store’s schedule. Workers without flexible access to a computer



were able to apply using a kiosk located within the store and, therefore, limited to applying during the store's operating hours. Almost all jobs require some sort of application, whether it is a contact made through a friendship network or a formal paper application. What is of note regarding the process to become an employee at The Supermarket is the structuring of the appropriate employee as someone willing to apply within the constraints determined by the retailer.

There is a larger trend within retailing and applications ask for fewer details of experience and personal interest in doing the work and rely on the personality assessment to judge an applicant's potential value. No insignificant amount of anger is instigated by these online personality assessments yet the advice elicited to assuage the irritation is focused on passing them, not absolving them. As they are incorporated into the standard mode of hiring, employees are participating in the structuring of the workforce as a particular group of people who can withstand the intrusion into one of the most intimate aspects of the self and allow assessment based not on what they can *do* but who they *are*.

Once the application is submitted, the employee further consents by participating in a lengthy hiring process that, again, asserts the needs of the retailer over the individual. We have become so accustomed to thinking like a corporate retailer that *of course* the retailer has streamlined its hiring process and does not accommodate thousands of worker's needs. This is true, of course, for the efficient functioning of a retailer but in no way is it indicative of

an inherent nature of the application process. The context and circumstances of employment have as much to do with the construction of it.

Current employees also strongly enforced the hiring norms by not allowing deviation from them even when directly requested. Hand delivering a print version of a letter of interest and my resume seemed an acceptable idea, in theory, but in practice was contested, socializing the novice, naïve worker into an experienced, streamlined and consenting employee. Like with any new (potential) hire, the socialization into the group was swift. The message conveyed – you can work like us or you can not work at all – coupled with an insecure job market and an arduous application process left many workers with no option except consent. There was little verbalization of discontent aimed at either The Supermarket or the constructed labor market; employees dissatisfied with the process often expressed their feelings as a personal discontent that was out of line with the imposing structure of “that’s just the way it is” – a deflection from the retailer to a vague intangible “reality.”

The acceptance of the belief that “it is the way it is” facilitates consent by totalizing the experience and disallowing alternatives. The need to earn a wage and the desire to work are strong motivating factors and desires for alternative forms of economic expression are quelled by the presentation of one, dominating, framework for understanding work. Those who have relatively better positions (without bombardment by shopping customers) are understood to have worked their way off the shop floor – a goal many co-workers shared. Conversations on the shop floor indicated that employees desired the managerial positions as a means to better their personal situations

rather than as a pulpit for instigating change. The Supermarket's emphasis on promotion from within encouraged consent with its focus on teamwork – "join us," "work with us," they said, yet never work *for* us, they implied. The language of employment denigrated the social contract between employer and employee by positioning the relationship as mutually constructed. Then, by restricting the ability of the employees to have their own needs met (scheduling, wages, benefits, reproduction of the self, personal relations) the responsibility for satisfaction has been transferred from retailer to employee.

The internalizing of responsibility is present in the ideology of low-wage workers as replaceable and reproducible. By positing that the job can be fulfilled by any warm body frustration, struggle and failure then become personal shortcomings. The initial trial period during which employees are learning to do this retail work creates instability in employment that further deteriorates the development of the working self as an autonomous being and instills a spirit of not only cooperation and containment but also consent. It was understood that employees left the company because they could not handle the stress and strain of the job. Although sentiments of envy occasionally circulated, the folklore also subtly reinforced the remaining employees non-decision to leave.

The relationship between consent and coercion is a contested one and workers simultaneously felt frustration and satisfaction about their employment situations. Questioning why people continue to work in supermarkets is a futile exercise for understanding the role that the retailer plays in constructing the modern workforce. It is often simpler to accuse workers of getting what they

deserve by taking these challenging low-wage jobs, but the hiring process can take weeks to months and low-wage retail employees rarely have the savings to weather voluntary unemployment. Although the wages are low, and often too low to singularly support oneself or one's family in a high cost of living area, wages dominated neither employee's perceptions of themselves nor the work they were doing. Like many of the low-wage workers in Newman's (1999) study, the job was about having security and feeling accomplished and being employed provides a sense of self worth that is difficult to challenge with further ideological aspirations of something better. In very uncertain economic times it is difficult to leave something concrete for something intangible. And it is precisely because the job was about more than the money that employees remained. The examples presented throughout the dissertation illustrate the emotional involvement of working with others, and the personal satisfaction derived from the "structure of employment" (Newman 1999).

Flippant comments directed at the inability of low-wage workers to get better jobs for themselves illustrate the boundaries of our own paradigms of work and challenge our conceptions of the appropriate salaries, appropriate commuting distances and times, appropriate hours, scheduling, and benefits. The larger conversation, although somewhat ignorant in its assumptions about the actuality of the reality of low-wage work, does provide the basis of the contemporary ideology of the role of work in society. In a large urban area with a relatively efficient public transportation system, a worker could, in theory, find a job somewhere else. The feasibility of working that job tends to become a moot point as the emphasis is on having the job itself. One explanation could be the mis-generalization of experience from one locale to another. As

Newman (1999) states in her analysis of the working poor, there is a certain ease to obtaining a low-wage service job in some suburban and small-town areas and teenagers with time to work can be hired before they even finish filling out the application and wages are higher to draw workers from a scarce labor pool. Recall that the majority of employees at The Supermarket had to wait months from the moment they completed the application, to having an interview, to finally being scheduled for the first shift. Hundreds, if not thousands, of people applied for every open position and a computer-assisted assessment helped managers differentiate the applicants. The job required hours and energy far beyond the scheduled and paid shift and left little time, energy and money to devote to a search for “better,” or even alternate, employment. The idea that there might be a better job takes the focus away from the absolute qualities of the job and, instead, judges The Supermarket as a workplace relative to other employers.

We cannot, however, expect low-wage retail workers to sacrifice themselves and their families by resisting labor conditions and fighting for change. The anonymity of modern capitalism does not allow for the security of social services and it would be inhumane to require workers already living paycheck to paycheck to risk eviction, hunger and humiliation in order to attempt to fight a billion dollar corporate monolith. Resistance on the parts of the employees does have a role to play in creating social change and many workers donated their time and energy to create a place to work that is mutually satisfying. It was unclear that the corporate interests were as altruistic.

### ***Moving beyond the supermarket walls***

The argument that I have presented is premised on the acknowledgement of workers as a dignified group of people and a challenge to think beyond current assumptions about low-wage work. The Supermarket's employees, although often hurt and frustrated by their interactions with the shoppers, were amazingly adept at finding meaning and satisfaction from "doing retail work." They rarely expressed feelings of self-pity and most were diligent workers who took pride in "doing work" well. When we analyze the retail workforce as individuals we see the struggles involved in supporting oneself and one's family on low wages and the pride taken in job recognition and promotion. When we step back, however, and analyze workers as social group, the picture presented indicates the capitalist reality of subordination of self to the corporation, diminishing social networks, and the emergence of a self-proclaimed beneficent corporate actor.

Ultimately, although the workers may each be personally satisfied, the low-wage retail service workforce, in general, has significant negative impacts on all members of our society. As we continue to limit the access to social resources such as respect, decency and self-sufficiency based on occupation, we are creating social, economic and cultural inequalities for millions of people. It is the structure of the capitalist system that we need to address, specifically the role of the corporation, and this dissertation will add empirical evidence to arguments advocating for a more just future for us all. Success is often attributed to personal accomplishments and numerous anecdotes exist illustrating the benefits of hard work and determination. The question has now

becomes, what do we see when we look beyond the stories of the individuals and continue examining the role of the retailer.

Supermarket work may not be low-skill, as I have argued in this dissertation, but it does lack a sense of autonomy for its workers. Like the fast-food workers in Leidner's (1993) and Newman's (1999) studies, supermarket workers were unable to assert themselves beyond the boundaries of their official positions within the retail organization. I do not expect time-strapped, and overworked, supermarket workers to be the sole advocates for change. And I do not expect that all customers will become kind shoppers and critical label readers.

Although we have seen large-scale consumer driven change, it is rare and temperamental. Unfortunately, it is also not clear how high-level policy decisions will necessarily change the conditions to benefit the consumers. I do hope that this dissertation stimulates discussions of this new corporate/environmental food regime (McMichael and Friedmann 2007) and the role of food retailing corporations in "producing consumption" in the food system by shaping not only the foods available, but also the social relations, within the supermarket.

## **APPENDIX A:**

### **SUPERMARKET JARGON**

The following terms were used on The Supermarket shop floor and appear throughout the dissertation:

**A 30:** Shorthand for the 30-minutes an employee is allotted for a break, legally mandated as a meal (lunch/dinner) break when an employee is scheduled to work over 6 hours in a row. “On a 30” was used to indicate that an employee was in the process of taking the break. Example: “She is on her 30.”

**Back cage:** See cage

**Backstock (aka overstock):** Extra product that did not fit on the shelves on the selling floor and was kept in the storage area not accessible to customers. Example: “There isn’t any toilet paper on the shelf, can you check the backstock?”

**Backup:** Shorthand for “backup cashier,” a worker who is assigned the task of providing additional help at the cash registers during busy times and assigned alternative tasks during the other times. Example: “Julia, we need you to be the backup this afternoon.”

**Bank:** A specific amount of money, in cash and coins, given to a cashier at the beginning of a shift. Example: “You must count your bank to make sure it has the right amount of money in it before putting it in your drawer.”

**Breaks:** The time allotted to employees for personal use while at work (use the phone, rest, have a snack, etc.). These fifteen minute periods were paid. “Staggered breaks” are breaks that are scheduled to not overlap so that no more than one employee is away from the sales floor at a given time. Example: “You can call your mother when you go on your break at 3.”

**Cage (aka “back cage”):** Slang for the storage area located in the back of the store, off of the sales floor, where additional items are kept that do not fit on the shop floor shelves (see backstock). Example: “Richard, can you see if Leonard is working in the cage?”



**Called out (aka “called in”):** When an employee phones the store to alert a manager that he/she will not be coming in to work a scheduled shift. The Supermarket did not require a reason, but it was assumed that calling out was due to being ill. Example: “Roberta called out this morning so she won’t be working this evening.”

**Cart:** A shelving unit on wheels, usually about waist high and 2’X3,’ that is used to transport items around the store. Example: “Can I use this cart to move the cans over there?”

**Cash:** The amount of paper money and coins in the register drawer (at any given time). A cashier began each shift with a bank and then accumulated monies from the paying customers. Example: “At the end of your shift, put your cash in this bag.”

**Check in:** To open and unpack boxes received from distributors and use the enclosed packing slip to ensure that all items have been delivered. Part of the “packing out” process described below. Example: “I need you to check in the order from Groceries ‘R’ Us.”

**Clock(ing) in and out:** The process of using the electronic system to mark oneself either present at work when arriving or absent from work when leaving. “On the clock,” refers to being marked present at work and eligible to earn wages. Example: “Have you clocked in yet? I need help moving these boxes.”

**Close:** See also “open.” A set of specific tasks to prepare the supermarket after the sales day has ended. Open is the set of specific tasks to prepare the supermarket for the sales day. Example: “It’s time to start closing, can you face those items?”

**Count(ing) out:** The process of tallying the cash, coins, credit card slips and coupons in one’s drawer. Example: “It’s time to close, you can count out now.”

**Credit card slip:** The piece of paper that the paying customer signs to acknowledge the charge to the credit card. These slips are collected and must be sorted by type of card. Example: “Can you please sign this credit card slip on the line?”

**Drawer:** Term used to refer to either the actual component piece that was used to hold cash, coins, coupons and credit card slips that fit into the cash register or the structural piece of the cash register that slid

open and closed that held the interior drawer. Each cashier was given a drawer (component piece) at the beginning of a shift and a bank of money. Both pieces were put into the drawer of the cash register.

Example: "Take your drawer and put it in Register 5."

Face/Facing: The straightening process of the products on the shelves. Most packages have an obvious front and back and products had to be arranged so that all of the fronts were facing the aisle, and hence, the customers. The second component to the facing process is ensuring that the products are in the correct spot on the shelf and this requires the ability to match the physical product to the correct tag on the shelf.

Example: "Can you face the soup cans?"

Floor: Shorthand for the sales floor, the public, front-stage section of the supermarket. Example: "We need you to work on the floor today."

Front-end: The multiple cash registers located along the periphery (front or side) of the shop floor as a permanent structure and the location where the majority of customers made their purchases. A front-end cashier is a cashier assigned to work at one of these registers.

Example: "I think Vivian is working on the front-end today."

On spot: Term used to describe the conclusion that the amount of money actually in the cash register drawer matches the amount of money expected to be in the drawer according to the sales entered on the register during the cashiering shift. There was a small margin of error – the amount could fluctuate within the boundaries and be considered close enough and, hence, on spot. An amount beyond the margin, whether too much or too little, would result in the cashier's record being marked (see points) and too many could result in termination. Example: "I have been on spot the past few days!"

On the clock: See clocking in/out

Open: See close

Over: See on spot

Overstock: See backstock

Packing out: The multi-step process of unpacking a delivery of items from a distributor and/or manufacturer and putting them on the shelves

for sale. Follows “checking in.” Example: “Can you pack out that order today?”

Page: To use the store’s intercom system. Example: “I need to page a manager for this.”

Point of purchase: Technically, the moment when payment is exchanged for goods but used, colloquially, as the cash register area. Also referred to as POP. Example: “Please take these bags to the premier cashier at POP.”

Points: When the expected amount of money in a cashier’s drawer did not coincide with the actual amount of money, the difference would be logged. There was a scale of error and “points” varied based on the amount of the discrepancy. See also on spot. Example: “I got a point today because there was an extra twenty in my drawer.”

Premier register (aka premier): The cash register that is used by the premier cashier who has been scheduled to work a full shift at the registers (versus the shop floor). Other cashiers are brought to the registers when the store gets busier (see backup) and they are then sent to work in other areas when the store is slower. The premier register is the largest and most dominant space for checking out and is always staffed by a cashier while the store is open for business. Example: “I got stuck at the premier ALL day.”

Price: To place a sticker with the regular (not sale) price on the item offered for sale. The correct price could be found on the shelf tag (see below) or in the computer-based inventory system. The Supermarket was located in a state that required all items to have stickers indicating the item price. Example: “You need to price all those cans before you put them on the shelf.”

Price gun: A hand held device that can be manipulated to print the cost of an item onto a sticker and affix it to the product. It can print multiple stickers with the same price (and not be reset each time) and a skilled operator can quickly price entire cases of products. An unskilled worker will often experience paper jams, misplaced labels, and paper cuts. Example: “Do you need to use this price gun?”

Punch: A “punch” occurs every time an employee “clocks in” or “clocks out” of the electronic time card system. It is, technically, the time

that is listed on the employee's timecard and used to calculate their wages. Example: "If I forgot to clock in today, how do I punch the time?"

Register: Cash register

Ring (aka "rings up" or "rung up"): The process of working on the cash register and/or paying for an item. Example: "Can you ring me up so I can pay for this apple?"

Score: See "on spot" and "points." The tally of a cashier's record. Example: "Are you worried about your score?"

Shelf: The storage units on the sales floor that hold the items available for sale. Example: "Which shelf do these crackers go on?"

Shelf tag: A 1" by 2" sticker that is required, by state law, to be affixed to the front of the shelf corresponding to the particular product located above. There are three main sets of numbers on a shelf tag – the largest set is the unit price of the item and it is located in the center of the tag. There is an additional price located in the upper left hand corner, often in an orange box, and this is the price per measure to be used to compare products with dissimilar unit measures (pound to pound, pint to pint, etc.). For example, one could use the per measure price to compare two different boxes of crackers to see which costs more per pound. The third number is the series of numbers that corresponds to a product's barcode. These numbers are very small and can be used to match an item to the correct shelf tag/location. Example: "When you are facing, make sure each product is above its shelf tag."

Shift: The specified period of time a worker is required to be at work. A typical workday at The Supermarket was eight and a half hours long – eight hours of paid work and a the thirty-minute, unpaid, break. Example: "How many shifts did you get this week? I only got scheduled for three."

Short: See over

Slammed: Slang used to describe being busy. The store might be full of customers and/or workers might have many tasks to attend to at a given time. Example: "We were really slammed and I didn't finish packing out the order."

**Stock:** In general, the products available for sale. If an item is “in stock,” it is available for purchase and typically on the shelf, though additional items could be in the backstock. If an item is “out of stock” it is an item that the store sells though there may not be any available items for purchase (either on the shelf or in the backstock). Example: “Jennifer, do you know when the cauliflower will be back in stock?”

**Switch shifts:** The opportunity to change one’s schedule. Employees were allowed to “switch shifts” with others as long as the decision was approved by a manager and both employees. Example: “George, can you switch shifts with me because I have class on Tuesday?”

**Tag:** see Shelf Tag

**Training:** The official process and courses used to teach one how to appropriately work at The Supermarket. Example: “I have a training course on customer service today.”

**UPC:** Short for Universal Product Code. The black and white bar code located on products that allows their sale to be recorded by a computer tracking system. Example: “You can match the UPC to the shelf tag to make sure the product is in the right place.”

**Void:** The process of deleting an item that has been entered in the cash register for sale. Typically, voids required approval and a code to be entered by a manager. Example: “Oops, I need to get a manager to void that.”

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